

Never Throw Your Life Away

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Disclaimer: None of the characters are mine. They are borrowed from "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Highlander - the Series" respectively.

Buffy/Highlander Crossover

Set some time after "Graduation Part 2" in the Buffyverse, and some time after the "Comes a Horseman" and "Revelations 6.8" episodes of Highlander. Warning: this story contains heavy spoilers for both shows.

* * 1 * *

"Tell me again why we're attacking this place in broad daylight instead of waiting until after nightfall." Xander demanded as he followed Willow through the hole in the chain link fence surrounding the deserted warehouse.

Buffy threw him an impatient look. "Because the longer we wait, the slimmer the chances of us actually getting him out alive."

"They've had him for more then 48 hours. How do you know he is still alive?" Oz asked slowly.

Buffy just pressed her lips together and turned away to help Giles pull the bag of weapons through. It was Cordelia who answered. "You should have seen the people he pulled out of there. Marco likes to make his victims suffer. Angel played him for a fool and took his

entire human zoo away from him. He is going to make him pay for that for as long as he can keep him alive."

Xander watched all blood drain from Buffy's face at Cordelia's words. "You're not helping here, Cordy." he told her. "And I still don't understand why you insisted on coming along. I thought you didn't want to do anymore demon fighting." He didn't want to admit it, but he was feeling a little bit jealous that Cordy was willing to put her own life on the line to try and rescue Angel. She would never do that for him. Her call to let them know that Angel had been captured, had brought with it the unwelcome news that she and Angel had started to hang out together in LA. He remembered Cordy chasing after Angel during their junior year at Sunnydale High, and now that Buffy and Angel had officially broken up there was nothing to stop her from taking up that pursuit again.

"He pays me well." Cordelia shrugged.

"He *pays* you?" Xander almost yelled, not liking the images that conjured up in his fertile mind.

"Of course!" Cordelia threw him a contemptuous look. "You didn't expect me to work for him for free, did you? I've got to pay for my rent somehow."

"Oh, you *work* for him." Xander said feeling a bit sheepish. "Wait a minute. What kind of work?"

"Hey! It's not like I don't have any skills!" She protested a little miffed. "I'm basically his secretary. Don't tell him, but he is really paying me too much. Especially since I can take off whenever I need to go to an audition. There are not many jobs like that to be had, so I don't want to lose it. Besides," Cordelia shrugged, "he hasn't gotten around to giving me this month's paycheck yet."

"Yeah, can't have him die before he signs that." Xander's sarcasm was lost on Cordelia, who simply nodded in agreement.

"I still think it's stupid hitting this place during the day. There is no place for the vamps to run." he groused.

"I don't want them to run." Buffy told him grimly. "If they've hurt Angel, I want them to die."

They had reached the side of the Warehouse and Buffy set down their bag of weapons. "You guys wait here. I'm going to see if I can get a look inside."

Giles laid a hand on her arm as she got ready to scale up a drainpipe. "Buffy, don't try anything on your own. Promise that you'll come back and get us!"

"Don't worry, Giles. I know that my chances of getting him out alive are a lot better if I have you guys along as back up."

Xander shook his head as he watched her climb up the pipe. She had been basically dumped by this undead bloodsucker, yet as soon as she had found out about him being in danger, she had dropped everything, literally, since she had been carrying a tray of drinks into the library for one of their all night research sessions at the time. She

had been all set on taking off immediately, with or without them. To try to rescue someone that had been dead for the last 243 years.

Women! He would never understand them.

They were dividing up the weapons, when Buffy dropped back down to land beside them. If anything her face looked even grimmer, deep lines of pain etched into the corners of her mouth.

"There are about twenty of them that I could see. They have Angel chained up against the south wall." She swallowed hard before adding. "They were all busy watching a big vamp with a thick black mustache pouring Holy Water on Angel's chest."

"Oh, good!" Cordelia said relieved.

"Good?" Buffy spun towards the former cheerleader, dropping into a fighting stance.

"Yeah. I was worried they might have killed him already." Cordy responded blithely unaware of the threat in Buffy's voice.

"Well, I guess your paycheck is safe." Xander quipped, then groaned inwardly when Buffy shot him a furious glare. Why couldn't he ever remember to think before he opened his mouth? He braced himself for her blistering retort, figuring that she would jump at the excuse to lash out at anybody, but she just wrapped her arms around herself and said quietly. "We have to get him out first."

"So there are twenty vampires?" Giles asked. Buffy nodded.

"That you could see." Xander felt compelled to add.

Buffy gave him a reluctant nod. "There could be more." She admitted grudgingly.

"Xander may have a point about waiting until nightfall." Oz pointed out reasonably. "If we can get some of them to run, that leaves less of them we have to fight."

Buffy only hugged herself harder. "Nightfall is more than six hours away. I am not leaving him in there for them to play with for that long!"

Xander barely managed to bite back on the remark that automatically sprung to his lips, but he guessed that what he had been thinking must have showed pretty clearly on his face anyway. Buffy gave him a long look, rubbing her hands along her arms before she turned away. "None of you have to come if you don't want to." she whispered in a tight voice.

"We're not going to let you go in there alone!" Willow stated immediately.

Oz shrugged. "Where Willow goes, I go."

Cordelia looked around for a moment then remarked: "There better be a bonus in this. Hazard pay or something."

Buffy turned and looked at him expectantly. "Just for the record," he told her, "I want to make it clear that if anything goes wrong, I reserve the right to say I told you so."

Buffy gave him a weak smile, then turned to pick up her weapons. "Giles, you, Oz and Willow come in from the north. The door there is half way up the side of the Warehouse and lets out on a kind of balcony. Try to shoot as many of them from up there as you can before coming down." She picked up a crowbar and portable welding torch and handed them to Xander and Cordelia. "You guys get Angel out of those chains. I'll keep the other vampires off your back."

"Then what?" Xander felt compelled to ask. "We can't get Angel out of there while it's still daylight, unless you want him to go up in flames. And in that case why bother rescuing him in the first place?"

"There is one of those trash containers on wheels in there. Dump him in, close the lid and wheel him out." Buffy told him curtly.

Xander felt his eyebrows go up in surprise: "I get to throw Angel into the trash? I am starting to like this plan!"

Giles broke in hastily before Buffy had a chance to reply to that: "Yes, actually this *is* quite a good plan. It being daylight out should actually work to our advantage, since none of the vampires will be able to follow us out."

* * *

Xander watched through a crack in the black paint covering the windows until he could see Giles and the others up on the balcony aiming their arrows at the vampires below, before he gave Buffy the signal.

Buffy spun around, kicked in the door with enough force that it was half ripped from its hinges and stormed in, crossbow at the ready, without any further delay. One vampire was caught in the sunlight streaming in through the door and went up in a scream of flame, directing everyone's attention towards Buffy. She fired her crossbow off on the run, but hit the vampire she had been aiming for in the throat instead of the heart. Without losing a single beat, Buffy dropped her now useless crossbow and charged into the mass of vampires before her, intent on cutting a path for Xander and Cordelia.

Picking up his crowbar Xander grabbed a hold of Cordelia's arm and followed in Buffy's wake. Cordy, bless her heart, had lit her propane torch and was putting it to amazingly good use, while Xander laid about him with the crowbar. Screams of dust out in the crowd told him that Giles and the others were finding targets for their arrows as well.

Buffy came up next to a square metal container on wheels and used it like a battering ram to force a path to Angel's side. Once there she spun around and prepared herself to hold the vampires off long enough for Xander and Cordy to do their job.

Xander jammed his crowbar into the link that secured Angel's chains to a thick iron ring set into the wall, but was unable to pry it

open. Dropping the crowbar he motioned for Cordelia to go to work on it with her torch. "Let me know when you got it hot. I'll watch your back."

One look at Angel's slumped form told him that they wouldn't get any help from the vampire anytime soon. He grimaced at the sight of the wounds and burn marks covering his torso. It was amazing the guy wasn't dead. Except that he was. No wonder Buffy had insisted on getting him out of there *now*.

Forcing himself to look away, he pulled out a stake just in time to have a vampire impale himself on it as Buffy spun him his way. Not even missing a beat he shoved another vampire out of his way and raised his stake at a third. This one brought up his right arm and hit Xander's hand hard enough that the stake went flying out of his hand sailing backwards high over his head. He registered the sound of it clinking against one of the windows just as the vampire caught him with a hard right to the jaw.

Stumbling back he collided with Cordelia, and managed to duck just in time to save his hair from getting singed by her torch. His attacker was not so lucky and caught the flame full in his face. Taking advantage of the breather afforded him, Xander quickly looked up at the wall above him. He felt a grin spreading across his face. This should be good! He bent down to pick up one of the empty glass bottles laying next to Angel, took a step back, and hurled it with all his might against the blackened windows set into the wall above them. He was rewarded with a shower of splintered glass raining down on them causing Cordy to shriek in protest, and an incoherent scream as sunlight streamed in through the broken window turning one of the vampires into a living torch.

Picking up another bottle he proceeded to throw it, only to have it hit the frame instead.

"God, Xander, would you quit that? How am I supposed to keep the flame on this if I have to keep ducking so I won't get my face slashed to pieces!" Cordelia yelled at him. "Her face is an actress' most important asset."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that." Xander muttered under his breath as he aimed for a window further off to the side. Just as he got ready to throw he saw an arrow fly straight across the room braking another windowpane. "Way to go, Willow!" He yelled. Willow gave him a proud grin as she reloaded her crossbow.

"Would you quit playing around and come over here?" Cordelia told him impatiently. "I think this is as soft as it is going to get!"

Throwing his glass bottle aimlessly into the mass of vampires now crowding back from the sunlight streaming in through the broken windows, he quickly picked up the crowbar and shoved it into the connecting link. Bracing his feet against the wall he pulled and twisted with all his might. "What do you mean this is as soft..." he huffed when the link finally gave out with a loud metal shriek. The crow bar went flying, almost hitting Cordy, and he tumbled to the floor to land on top of Angel's slumped form.

"Sorry, man." he told the groaning vampire as he rolled off of him.

At least he was starting to come around. He really wanted Angel awake to enjoy getting thrown in the trash. Besides, it would be damn hard to get him in there if he was nothing but dead weight.

"Come on, Angel buddy, wake up!" He encouraged the vampire. "Time to blow this fun house."

By now they were separated from the rest of the warehouse by a growing band of sunlight, leaving just enough shadow to keep Angel from going up in flames. Xander had just gotten Angel to his feet when something came hurtling across the band of sunshine, almost knocking them over.

Angel's eyes widened in horror and he lurched forward to catch the small form of the Slayer in his arms. "Buffy!"

Xander swallowed hard as he saw the deep slash that ran across her belly to disappear below her ribcage. There was so much blood. He sank down next to Angel as the vampire gently lowered himself and his burden to the floor.

"Angel" Buffy smiled up at him. "You're all right!"

There was another deep gash in her left shoulder, and a cut across her right forearm. There was so much blood! Xander thought numbly. How could there be so much blood? He cringed as Buffy convulsed and coughed a bright red stain of blood against the chest of the vampire holding her.

"Oh, Buffy..." Angel's quiet voice held a world of anguished despair. "We have to get you to a hospital!"

Buffy only shook her head. "Don't bother. I'll never make it." Xander stared at her puzzled as she lifted her right arm up towards Angel's face. "Here, that should help you make it out of here. The others will need your help."

Understanding slowly dawned on him as he watched Angel shake his head in horror. "No! You're going to be all right. You have to be!"

"Angel, I am going to die anyway. Why waste it?"

"No!" Angel told her even more forceful, and Buffy let her arm drop back down with a sigh. She barely suppressed another cough and turned to Xander.

"I guess you get to say 'I told you so' after all." She told him weakly.

"Oh, God! Buffy!" Was all he managed in reply.

"Promise to look after the others, Xander, make sure they're all right." She pleaded with him.

Unable to utter a word he simply nodded. Buffy gave him a grateful smile before she turned back towards Angel. Looking deeply into his brown eyes she told him: "Live, Angel, be happy... just... don't lose your soul again." she added wrinkling up her nose the way that Xander had always found so irresistible. With a start Xander realized that

there were tears dripping down on Buffy's face. He hadn't known vampires could cry.

Another cough threatened as Buffy suddenly reached up and firmly pulled down Angel's head to capture his lips in a deep kiss. Angel tried to pull away as she convulsed with another cough, but Buffy had both arms locked firmly around his neck and refused to let him go. Xander saw Angel's eyes widen in shock and found himself staring at the spot of Buffy's blood on the vampires pale chest. He saw Angel swallow involuntarily and quickly looked away fighting the nausea twisting his stomach.

After a moment Buffy relaxed her arms and slowly sank back into Angel's lap smiling up at him with something close to triumph in her eyes.

Eyes still wide with shock Angel managed to utter a strangled "Buffy!" as he reflexively licked away the blood staining his lips.

God! Xander thought, I could have lived without seeing that. Buffy's breath became labored as her body was racked by another cough.

Angel held her carefully, his face an anguished mask. Buffy tried to lift up her hand and Angel caught in one of his, kissing it softly. A shadow of her sweet smile spreading across her face Buffy whispered: "I love you..."

Xander watched the life drain out of her face. Her whole body seemed to shrink. She suddenly looked so small and incredibly fragile. He heard a low rumble that slowly built into something between an anguished scream and a desperate howl that seemed to resonate in his very bones as Angel threw back his head. Xander swallowed hard as he found himself staring into two burning yellow orbs overshadowed by a heavily ridged brow.

In the stunned silence that had fallen over the warehouse Angel shifted the Slayer's dead body from his own lap into Xander's with infinite care. Folding her small hands together over her chest he pressed a silent kiss to her swiftly cooling forehead before he launched himself across the strip of sunlight, his teeth bared in a vicious snarl.

Frozen in place Xander watched wide-eyed as Angel began to tear into the vampires still left standing in the main part of the warehouse like a berserker. He felt a shaky hand settle on his own and looked over to find Cordy looking at him with a mixture of sympathy and shock. Slowly he reached out one of his arms and gathered her close to him, unsure if he was trying to comfort her, or looking for comfort himself.

"Oh, God." Cordy whispered as she buried her face against his shoulder.

Unable to move, Xander just sat there, watching as Angel kept going after the other vampires with no regard for his own safety. He didn't even try to avoid any of the blows or cuts aimed in his direction. He just kept attacking all out, a menacing rumble rising from his chest. His blows started to come faster and faster until they seemed to blur one into the next. Vampires started to flee out the doors, choosing

the sure death of the bright sunshine outside over the insane monster raging inside.

He felt more then saw Giles and the others come to stand beside him, their eyes likewise riveted on the spectacle unfolding before them.

"Oh, wow." Willow breathed softly.

"What's gotten into him?" Oz asked quietly.

"Buffy..." Xander swallowed hard. Remembering Buffy coughing into Angel's mouth he realized that that answer was quite literally true, though he didn't intend to explain that to anyone else.

The others looked down at him and saw Buffy's torn body for the first time.

Xander watched the shock spread from face to face as the realization of Buffy's death slowly sank in.

Giles sank down beside Xander and slowly took Buffy's still form into his arms. Willow turned to hide her face against Oz' shoulder, crying helplessly.

Buffy's last words to him echoed through Xander's mind, and he slowly pulled himself to his feet. 'Promise me to take care of them, Xander, make sure they're all right.' As much as he might wish to deny it, he was sure that Angel was one of those she had asked him to look after, and right now he looked about as far from all right as you could get.

He watched as Angel drove the last two remaining vampires towards the door and the deadly sunlight beyond it. He watched them break and run, and as Angel started to follow them he determinedly stepped in front of the vampire blocking his way to the door.

There was no recognition in the vampire's eyes as he pulled back his arm to deliver a punch that was likely to break Xander's jaw. Ignoring his fear, Xander grabbed a hold of his other arm and tried to shake him out of it. "Angel!" he screamed at him, trying to break through the vampires berserker rage. He helplessly watched the fist hurtling towards him... and stop only inches away from his face. Xander felt his knees go weak and took a deep breath. He saw a shiver run through the other man as his vampire features melted away. For a moment he found himself staring at Angel's sweat covered face, looking into a pair of eyes that held utter desolation, then the other collapsed into a lifeless heap at his feet.

Most of him was still in utter shock at everything that had happened, but the part of his mind that always commented on everything, and kept getting him into trouble with his smart aleck remarks couldn't help but say: "Great. He couldn't have waited until *after* I got to stuff him into that trashcan?"

* * 2 * *

Xander smothered another yawn as he sat on a chair next to the bed in Angel's apartment and watched him writhe in the grip of yet another nightmare. He idly wondered what the 243-year-old vampire might be

dreaming about.

The others had helped him get the unconscious vampire into the safety of his own apartment. They hadn't used the trashcan after all. They had just opened one of the double doors and pulled Oz' van up right next to him. Cordelia had provided them with the right address and Willow had done what she could to patch up his numerous wounds and burns on the way over. Getting him from the van into the apartment had been less of a problem than he had expected. Cordelia had found Angel's garage door opener and car keys in one of his pockets. They had simply pulled into the attached garage and closed the door long enough to unload and carry him into his bedroom.

After that the others had left to meet up with Giles at the hospital. On the one hand he didn't envy them having to break the bad news to Buffy's parents, on the other hand he would have preferred to be there with them instead of holding this lonely vigil at Angel's bedside.

But he had promised Buffy that he would make sure everyone was all right, and right now the person to worry about doing something stupid was Angel. So he would stick around and try to talk some sense into him when he woke up. He threw a look at the alarm clock on the bedside table. Almost 10 o'clock already and Angel still hadn't woken up.

He wasn't sure which had been worse: the endless hours Angel had lain there motionless looking like the corpse he was, or the last couple hours when he seemed to drift from one nightmare into the next with only short pauses in between.

Xander felt his eyes drift shut and jerked himself back awake. After the worry he had caused everyone last fall by falling asleep on Oz watch, he had promised himself that he would never let himself fall asleep on watch again, but he was slowly losing his battle to stay awake. None of them had gotten a lot of sleep over the last two days while they tried to find out where Angel was being held, and it was all catching up with him.

He looked around the room. The door opened inward. If he bedded down in front of it that should be enough to prevent Angel from leaving without his knowledge. Wracked by yet another yawn he picked up an extra pillow and blanket and made himself as comfortable as possible on the hard floor. 'Wherever you are now, you better appreciate what I'm doing for you here, Buffy.' he thought fuzzily as he drifted off to sleep.

He woke up feeling no better than when he had lain down. Worse, since the hard floor had made his whole body ache. With a groan he sat up to see what time it was. The sight of the empty bed instantly jolted him fully awake. He looked around but there was no sign of the apartment's rightful owner.

Then he noticed that the curtains weren't all the way closed and the window behind them open. Almost four am. He only had a few hours left before sunrise.

He stuck his head out of the window and breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the vampire sitting on the fire-escape just outside of it. Wrapping a light blanket around himself against the early morning

chill he climbed out of the window and sat down next to Angel.

They sat in absolute silence for almost an hour, simply watching the city lights below, each of them lost in his own world of grief.

The sound of a clock somewhere striking five o'clock reminded Xander of why he was here. "You better come inside, Angel. The sun will be rising soon."

After a pause long enough to make Xander wonder if the other had even heard him, Angel finally asked him in a rough voice: "Why?"

"What do you mean why? Because you'll turn into a crispy fritter as soon as the sun comes up if you don't!" Xander told him a little confused by his question.

"Why did you stop me from running out into the sun at the warehouse? You've never liked me much." Angel elaborated.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Xander countered. "Buffy asked me to make sure that everyone was all right. That most certainly included you."

"Buffy is *dead* - because of me." Angel told him gravely.

"How do you figure that? I didn't see you kill her."

"She went to the warehouse because of me. It's my fault she got killed."

"Yeah? Well, take a number. Giles is convinced it's his fault for not having trained her better. Willow blames herself for missing that vamp that slashed her shoulder." Xander ran a hand through his hair and gave a bitter laugh. "Hell, if I had paid closer attention, I'm sure there would have been something I could have done to make sure she would survive. "

"It's not the same. She never would have gone in if it hadn't been for me." Angel repeated.

Xander let out a frustrated sigh. This was getting them nowhere. Angel wasn't even listening to him, just repeating the same thing over and over.

"You know what? You're right. She never would have gone in there if it wasn't for you." Xander told him no longer even trying to hide his frustration. He almost stopped what he was going to say, as the other finally looked at him and he got a glimpse at the guilt and misery in his dark brown eyes. Then he forced himself to go on, slowly picking up steam as he went. "She was so worried about you she wouldn't even wait until nightfall once we found out where they were holding you. She was going to go in and get you no matter what. Alone if she had to."

Xander shook his head and looked out over the sleeping city. "I never could understand what she saw in you. You're a vampire. You've killed people. But none of that ever mattered to her. Not as long as you had your soul."

"You know what they say: Love is blind." Angel told him in a choked

voice.

"God, I wish that was all. It would make everything so much easier." Xander told him with a frustrated sigh. "Fact is, much as I hate to admit it, you're actually a pretty decent guy - when you're not going around killing people." Xander met Angel's disbelieving stare with a shrug and a crooked smile.

"That's not the point though. The point is: she died so you could live." - "Do you think I wanted her to do that?" Angel interrupted him savagely. "If you really think *that*..."

Xander broke in, talking right over top of him: "It doesn't *matter* what I think! It matters that *she* thought you would be worth it. She gave you the greatest gift one person can give to another, and you're just going to throw that away!"

"I never wanted..."

"I don't *care* what you want or wanted!" Xander finally yelled at him. "You have no right to make her death meaningless by destroying what she paid for with her life to save!" He glared at Angel, his fingers itching to wrap around his neck so he could shake him and take some of his own grief and frustration out on him. Instead he reached out and poked the vampire in the chest with every word trying to drive his point home. "The way I see it, you *owe* it to her to take your life and make something out of it."

When Angel remained quiet he finally got up with a sigh. Well, at least he had tried.

"She asked you to *live*, to be happy! The least you can do is try." He said quietly as he turned to climb back through the window. 'Let him fry if he is so dead set on it!' he thought grimly. 'There is nothing more I can do to stop him.'

He was almost through the window when he caught Angel's soft: "I'll never be happy without her."

Xander decided that there was no way he was going to let dead guy have the last word, so he stuck his head back out through the window and told him firmly: "Maybe not. But you *can* live without her."

After he left the apartment to walk to the nearest bus station he looked back once and shook his head when he saw that Angel was still sitting outside. For a moment he was tempted to go back, to knock him out and drag him back inside. But as pleasant as the idea of hitting Angel over the head with a baseball bat might be, it really wouldn't solve anything. He would just slip back outside the next time Xander turned his back on him. He turned away with a frustrated sigh and told the heavens: "I tried, Buffy, I really tried. What more do you want?"

* * *

The picture of Angel sitting outside on the fire-escape just wouldn't leave him alone. Twice he got up as the bus neared a stop to get off and go back, but sat back down, telling himself that he had done what he had promised Buffy he would.

It never even entered his mind that the others probably had left the hospital and went home hours ago until he got off the bus in front of the Mother of Mercy Hospital. For a moment he stood wondering what to do next. He shot a look up at the slowly lightening sky. 'Even if you went back right now, you would never get there before sunrise. So quit thinking about Angel!' he ordered himself. He would go in and call Cordy to come and pick him up, and that would be it, he decided as he entered the hospital in search of a phone.

He pulled out a couple quarters and entered the waiting area to make the call. He stopped in his tracks as he was greeted by the sight of Cordelia sitting in one of the chairs idly thumbing through a magazine.

"Cordy! What are you still doing here?" He asked surprised. "I thought you guys would have gone home hours ago."

"Oz took Willow back to the motel, but did I go? No, I had to be nice and offer to give Giles a ride back once he got through talking to Buffy's mom and dad." She closed the magazine and laid it to one side. "So did Angel finally wake up? Is he all right? Did he sign my check?"

"Your check? Gee, let me see. He was busy being tortured for two days, then his girlfriend died in front of his eyes and he went on a rampage. Somehow I don't think that signing your paycheck is what he is thinking about right now." Especially since he is busy waiting for the sunrise, he added to himself throwing another look at the slowly lightening sky outside.

"Well, call him and remind him! My rent payment's due in a couple of days and Star Fashion is having a great sale tomorrow." Cordy told him.

"Call him? Because you might miss a sale? Are you serious?"

"Why, he can't answer the phone?" Cordelia asked. "It's right beside his bed."

"Oh, and just how do you know *that*?" Xander wanted to know, not liking the idea of Cordelia having been in Angel's bedroom.

"Who do you think insisted on it being there and made sure that it had a loud enough ring so he couldn't sleep through it? As his secretary I have to be able to get a hold of him, after all." Cordelia told him exasperated. "Now will you call him already?"

"I most certainly will not..." Xander started when it occurred to him that this might be a way to get the vampire back inside his apartment. He had no idea how he could get him to stay there, but it was at least a step in the right direction. "...waste a single second. What's his number?"

As Xander waited impatiently for the vampire to answer his phone, Giles walked into the waiting room, closely followed by Buffy's parents.

"Finally!" Cordy greeted them. "Can we go now?"

"Yes, I guess there is nothing more we can do." Giles said.

"What do you mean, there is nothing more we can do?" Joyce demanded.
"We have to find out what happened to her!"

Hank put an arm around his ex-wife's shoulder. "Joyce, I'm as upset about the disappearance as you are, but..."

Joyce shrugged his arm off impatiently. "You don't understand! Mr. Giles we have to find her! Surely you can see that!"

'Find who?' Xander wondered as someone finally picked up the phone in Angel's apartment.

"What?" He heard Angel ask in a tired voice.

"Hey, Angel!" He answered distractedly while still trying to listen to the conversation between Giles and Buffy's mom. "Cordelia wanted to me to remind you..."

He broke off as he heard Joyce ask Hank: "Who would steal the corpse of an 18-year-old girl? And the door, how do you explain that the door had been kicked open *from the inside*?"

'Someone had stolen Buffy's corpse?' Xander thought stunned totally losing track of what he had been saying to Angel.

"Remind me of what?" Angel prompted him to finish his sentence.

"Buffy's gone?" Xander blurted out trying to absorb this newest development.

"I know that!" Angel told him curtly.

"You do?" Xander asked surprised. "How?"

"Xander, I was there, I..." Angel broke off, and Xander's mind went into overdrive.

"You turned her?" He whispered appalled. "How could you do that to her! And then you were just going to run out on all of us and leave us to clean up the mess?!?"

"What are you talking about? What mess?" Angel asked confused, but Xander was too angry to stop now.

"Sunrise is too good for you! If I get my hands on you, you'll wish we'd never pulled you out of that warehouse!" Xander told him incensed.

"Xander!" Angel finally yelled trying to get his attention. "What the *hell* are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about! I'm talking about Buffy kicking her way out of the morgue, because you turned her into a bloodsucking monster like yourself." Xander told him savagely.

"What?!"

"Well, how else would you have known she's disappeared? That kiss was all just a pretense, wasn't it?" Xander asked bitterly.

"Buffy's body disappeared from the morgue?" Angel asked.

"As if you didn't know!"

"I didn't." Angel stated quietly.

"But, you said... when I told you, you said you knew!"

"You said she was gone. I thought you meant she was... dead." Angel's voice was so low, Xander could barely hear him.

"Oh." Xander took a moment to process that. "Joyce said that it looked like the door was kicked open from the inside, and when you said you knew..." Xander trailed off uncertainly.

"You came to the obvious conclusion that I had turned her into a vampire." Angel grimly finished the sentence for him.

"Well, what else was I supposed to think?" Xander defended himself. Angel remained quiet.

"Could she be one?" Xander asked after a moment. The accusation was gone from his voice, replaced by something almost like hope.

"I don't see how." Angel told him quietly. "And even if she was, that would no longer be Buffy. The next time she saw you, any of you, she would be trying to rip out your throats or worse. Being turned into a vampire isn't a blessing, it's a curse."

"A curse... Thanks, man. A curse is precisely what we need! I've got to go talk to Willow and Giles." Xander was about to hang up ignoring Angel's demands for more explanations, when he caught sight of Cordy waving her hands to get his attention. "Oh, and Cordy said not to forget to sign her paycheck!" he said hanging up the phone.

He turned around to find everybody staring at him.

"Who was that on the phone?" Buffy's dad asked. "And what in the world were you talking about?"

Shit, he had forgotten that there were people in the room that didn't know Buffy's secret.

"That was Angel. He is kind of a friend of ours. I thought maybe he would have an idea of what could have happened to Buffy." Xander answered trying to keep his answer vague, while still giving enough information so the others would understand what he meant.

"And why did you think this guy would know anything about body theft?" Hank asked suspiciously.

'Good question,' Xander thought, 'and how am I supposed to answer that without opening a whole can of worms?'

To his surprise Cordy came to his rescue without even missing a beat. "Angel is a private investigator here in LA. In his line of work he comes across all kinds of weird stuff."

"He actually might be able to help." Giles admitted. "But it is kind of late - or early. I think we should all try to get some rest. We can discuss this further at a later time."

"I really don't see why any of you should get involved at all. This is my daughter we are talking about here." Hank told them. "If anyone calls in an outside investigator it should be me. In the mean time I say we let the police handle this. That's what they are here for."

Then he turned towards his ex-wife: "Where are you staying? Can I offer you my guest room?"

"Thanks, but I've already got a room." Joyce told him. "Shouldn't you be getting ready for work anyway?"

"I can call in sick if you need me." Hank offered.

"That's all right. I'll be fine. You go ahead." Buffy's dad clearly wasn't too happy about it, but he accepted his rejection with as much grace as he could muster.

"Well, don't hesitate to call me if there is anything you need." He reminded Joyce, kissing her softly on the cheek before he left the waiting room.

"Can we go now?" Cordy asked impatiently.

"Mr. Giles, can I give you a ride?" Joyce Summers asked. "I'd like to find out what really happened now that Hank is gone."

"Yes, yes, of course." Giles answered taking off his glasses and massaging the bridge of his nose.

"Hey, what about Buffy? I think I have an idea..." Xander started only to be interrupted by Giles.

"Not now, Xander. Cordelia, would you mind taking Xander back to the motel? We'll get together again tonight. Surely your idea can wait until then?"

Without waiting for an answer Giles motioned for Joyce to lead the way and followed her out of the room.

"Why won't anyone listen to me?" Xander asked the room at large.

* * * * *

The first thing she became aware of was the cold. She opened her eyes to total darkness. Where was she? What had happened? Her confusion grew as she tried to sit up, and banged her head painfully on a smooth, cold ceiling right above her. No matter which way she turned all she encountered was smooth, cold metal. Panic gripped her throat as the walls seemed to close in on her, threatening to cut off her supply of air. Bracing herself she kicked her legs as hard as she could against the wall at her feet.

Her effort was rewarded by a metal screech and a low bang as well as light suddenly streaming in to her coffin-like cubicle. At the same

time the metal platform she was on started to slide out into the room beyond, only to stop as the metal door rebounded into it with another loud clang.

Gulping air she forced herself to calm down and slowly climb out of her cubicle. She looked around the room. What was she doing in a morgue? She remembered Giles hiding in one of their cubicles a long time ago. Had she been hiding? From what?

She brushed her hands over her hips and looked down in surprise as she felt the stiffness of her garments. She froze at the sight of the dried blood that caked most of her clothing. With shaky hands she pulled away her ripped shirt to look for the wounds that had to be hiding underneath though there was no pain. Flashes of memory resurfaced. She had been fighting - vampires. Lots of vampires.

One of them had slashed her arm before she managed to stake him. Another had buried a knife in her shoulder. Then she hunched over, instinctively cradling her stomach, as she remembered a big vampire with a thick black mustache burying a sharp metal spike in her belly.

She remembered looking up at Angel, tricking him into drinking some of her blood since she was dying anyway... Her brain latched onto that last thought. She had died.

"Oh, God." She must have accidentally swallowed some of Angel's blood when she had kissed him. That was the only thing that would explain her standing here, completely healed, - and that meant she was...

"No!" Wrapping her arms around herself she leaned back against the wall shivering uncontrollably and closed her eyes. "Oh, God, please no! I'm dead! I can't be..." She couldn't bring herself to say it. Somehow it seemed less real as long as she didn't say it out loud.

Tears started to pour down her cheeks and she pressed one hand over her mouth to smother a sob.

* * 3 * *

"Thanks, Mac. I really appreciate you coming along for this." Joe Dawson told the handsome young man walking next to him.

"No problem Joe." Duncan MacLeod answered him. "I was only too glad for the excuse to leave. You know how Methos gets when he tries to cook one of his special dinners."

"I just hate hospitals." Joe said apologetically. "Ever since my legs went to hell in 'nam I've spent entirely too much time in them. Let's get out of here before that doctor tries to get me to stay over night."

They were just stepping off the elevator at the back of the ground floor when Duncan felt the unmistakable sensation of an immortal coming back to life.

"We aren't leaving just yet." Duncan told him distractedly. "Can you draw that orderly away? I need to take a look at who woke up in the

morgue."

"Mac! How am I supposed to do that without them insisting on keeping me here? If it's one of you guys, I am sure he has plenty experience waking up in morgues. Why can't he find his own way out? I'm your Watcher not your decoy!"

"And what if it's his first time? He'll be totally disoriented. He'll need someone to explain things to him, to be his teacher, or he could make trouble for all of us." Seeing the martyr look on Joe's face he added with a smile. "Besides, think of the prestige of having found a new immortal to be added to the Watcher's database."

"Oh, all right!" Joe grumbled. "But you owe me for this one, MacLeod, both of you!"

As soon as Joe had gotten the orderly's attention, Duncan slipped down the short corridor and into the morgue.

What he found was a petite blond girl leaning against the opposite wall with her eyes closed. She had her arms wrapped around herself in an attempt to stop the violent shivers running through her body. Judging by her torn and blood soaked clothing she had died a very messy death.

"No!" He heard her protest. "Oh, God, please no! I'm dead! I can't be..."

Her words confirmed his suspicion that this was her first death. It really seemed to have shaken her up badly. He took a step closer as she pressed one hand over her mouth to smother a sob tears starting to stream down her cheeks.

"It's okay." He told her laying a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "It's not as bad as it seems."

The next moment he found himself thrown halfway across the room.

"Get away from me!" She snarled, anger and fear radiating from her in waves.

Duncan held up both his hands palms out. "Calm down. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm here to help you."

He watched her lift a hand to feel her forehead, a confused look on her face. "Nothing happened. Angel makes it look so easy. Just - grr - instant vamp face."

"Who's Angel?" Duncan asked cautiously

"A friend of mine." She told him curtly. "You're not human, are you?"

"Not exactly, no." Duncan admitted.

"Well, that would explain why I don't feel any desire to attack you and rip out your throat." He heard her mumble to herself and felt his eyebrows shoot up. 'What in the world have I gotten myself into now?' Her next question did nothing to quiet his growing alarm: "So what

are you then, some kind of immortal demon sent down to guide me with riddles?"

Deciding not to comment on the demon part for now he temporized: "Well, I'm an Immortal, just like you, and I'm willing to be your teacher, but I'm not much for riddles." He was starting to seriously question this girl's sanity. 'Worry about that later,' he told himself, 'first get her out of here, then keep her away from people until you figure out what's going on in her head.' He pulled a lab coat from a hook next to the door and handed it to her.

"Here, put this on. If people out there see the state your clothes are in, they'll start asking all kinds of questions. Which is something we'd both like to avoid, I think." He was relieved when she put on the coat without further protest.

"I'd like to avoid people all together if possible." She told him. "There is no telling what would happen."

Not the most reassuring response, but amazingly close to what he himself had been thinking. Maybe there was hope for her yet.

"By the way I am Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod." He told her as he lead the way out of the morgue. "And you are?"

"I'm Buffy the..." He looked back at her as she broke off abruptly and saw pain flash across her face as she pressed her lips together in a thin line. "Just Buffy." She told him in a tight voice.

He led her to a small side entrance he had noticed earlier and opened the door for her. She stepped through but refused to step out from under the building's overhang. "I can't go out there," she told him, "the sun is shining!"

"You won't be in it for long. My car is just around the corner." He tried to reassure her.

"I can't!" Buffy protested. "I'll burn!"

One look at her face told him that she was truly terrified. He shook his head. She was easily one of the strangest girls he had ever come across. Deciding that talking wouldn't help, he pulled out the sword he kept hidden under his coat, and brought the pommel down hard on the back of her head. Putting his sword back away he picked her up with a sigh. He couldn't wait to hear what Methos would have to say.

* * *

By the time he knocked on Methos' door he was hot and tired and cursing the impulse that had caused him to get involved in the first place. Why couldn't she have woken up just a few minutes later?

Methos opened the door his eyebrows shooting up at the sight of Duncan standing there, Buffy's corpse slung over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Shooting him a warning glare MacLeod pushed past him and dumped Buffy unceremoniously onto Methos leather couch before gratefully sinking down into the chair beside it.

"Piece of advice: killing her and dragging her home with you isn't the best way to endear yourself to a girl, even if she is immortal." Methos remarked as he handed Duncan a cold bottle of beer from the refrigerator.

"I guess you learned that first hand?" As soon as the words were out of his mouth Duncan wished them unsaid as he watched Methos wince in response. He hadn't meant to remind Methos of Cassandra and everything he had recently learned about Methos' past. He was trying to avoid the whole subject of Chronos and the Four Horsemen as much as possible. He still hadn't quite come to terms with the revelation that one of his best friends had once been proud to be one of the most feared men on the planet, massacring innocents just for the fun of it.

He took a swig of the cold beer. "She woke up in the morgue just as we were about to leave the hospital. Joe played decoy so I could get her out unnoticed."

"Her first death?" Methos asked.

Duncan nodded and gingerly pressed the cool bottle against his sore jaw. "It shook her up pretty badly. At least I hope that's all that was making her act so strangely."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, she kept talking about demons and angels and ripping people's throats out. Then she refused to go out onto the street, too worried about getting a sunburn." Duncan took another pull from his beer.

"So what did you do?" Methos wanted to know.

Duncan shrugged. "I knocked her out." At Methos disbelieving look he added defensively. "What else was I supposed to do? Arguing obviously wasn't going to change her mind, and I didn't want to make a scene."

"So you knocked her out, accidentally breaking her neck." Methos concluded.

"No, she broke her neck when she fell down your stairwell." Duncan corrected him. "Why can't you live somewhere with an elevator?"

"I do. The elevator is around the corner in the lobby."

"Now you tell me!" Duncan grumbled.

"How did she come to fall down the stairs?" Methos asked intrigued by Duncan's story.

"Have you ever tried to carry someone up that many steps? Well, I decided that I had carried her far enough; she could climb the rest by herself. So I set her down on top off the banister and tried to wake her up. The next thing I know, I have a sore jaw and she is flying backwards down the stairwell." He downed the rest of his beer and set the empty bottle down on the coffee table. "And the worst thing is, I *still* had to carry her up the rest of the stairs, not to mention the ones she fell down."

Methos shook his head, a slight smile on his lips. "You really have a way with women."

Before Duncan could think of a retort, a gasp from the couch told them that Buffy had just revived. Duncan watched her roll off the couch and settle into a fighter's stance with the cat-like grace of a trained athlete and was glad that he was far enough away that he didn't present her with an immediate target for her balled fists.

* * * * *

Buffy threw a quick look around trying to get herself oriented. She was in a strange apartment that somehow reminded her of Angel's old place. It had the same scattering of valuable artwork mixed in with more modern furnishings. She quickly pushed any thought of Angel away. She couldn't allow herself to be distracted by thoughts of him and what she had become thanks to her own stupidity.

Instead she concentrated on the two men before her.

One was the dark haired guy with the ponytail she had met at the morgue, Duncan Mac-something-or-other, who presumably had brought her here. Wherever here was. She suppressed a satisfied smirk at the sight of his disheveled state and the bruise purpling his chin. Deciding that he posed no immediate threat she turned her attention to the other man. He was tall and lanky, and though less muscled than his companion, she decided that it wouldn't do to underestimate him in a fight. He had short-cropped hair and lazy eyes that tried to hide a sharp though cynical intellect.

Both men were watching her silently, Duncan with some resentment, probably because of his sore jaw, the other with bored amusement.

"Where am I?" She demanded. "'How did I get here and who are you guys?"

It was the taller one that answered her. "You're in my apartment in LA. Duncan carried you here. As to who we are, we're Immortals, like you. Traditionally when ever one of us dies for the first time an older Immortal will offer to become your teacher, to help you gain the skills you will need to survive, and explain the rules of the game to you."

They were like her? Did that make them vampires as well? They sure didn't act much like any vampires she had run across. But then, what did she know how vampires acted among themselves?

"Game? What game?" she asked suspiciously. Angel had never mentioned any game, had he?

"All Immortals compete for the ultimate prize." Duncan took up the explanation. "We fight each other with the sword in single combat. The winner takes the losers head and with it his power. In the end there can be only One."

That last had the sound of an often-repeated ritual.

"One what?" Buffy wondered. "One supreme headhunter? You aren't by

any chance leftovers from Balthazar's troupe? You don't dress much like them, but they were heavily into pointless dueling with swords. Personally, I'm an old-fashioned girl, I prefer a simple wooden stake." I'm babbling, Buffy thought, stop babbling, Buffy!

She watched the two men exchange a puzzled look.

"Who's this Balthazar?" Duncan asked her.

"A seriously overweight demon. He and his sword-toting flunkies came to Sunnydale in search of an amulet that was supposed to restore his power. He got fried in his bathtub." She told them shortly.

"A demon." Duncan looked at her as if he thought she was crazy.

Buffy shrugged. "We get a lot of them, what with Sunnydale being built right on top of the Hellmouth. Makes for an interesting change from slaying vampires."

"Vampires." Now Duncan looked like he had bitten into an apple and found it rotten. But the other guy suddenly straightened from where he had been slumped against the Kitchen Island, interest blazing in his eyes.

"Vampires?" he asked. "You're the Slayer?"

"I was. Before I died." Buffy fought the words past the lump in her throat. "I guess I'm just another monster now."

"Wait a minute." Duncan broke in. "What's a Slayer?"

"The one girl in all the world with the ability to slay the vampires." Buffy told him with a sad smile. "This is really Giles speech. He loves to do the whole spiel about the forces of evil and the Slayer's sacred duty to fight them."

"But there is no such thing as vampires!" Duncan exclaimed. "It was all just one of Nicholas Ward's scams to cover up his murders. He used a pair of special tongs to make it look like his victims had been bitten by a vampire to throw the police off his trail."

"Vampires aren't real?" Buffy asked him slightly amused. "You haven't been around for very long, have you?"

She watched Duncan's mouth drop open as his companion told her with a smile: "It shows doesn't it? Don't worry, he'll learn - if he lives long enough." Then he walked over towards Buffy and offered her his hand. "I'm Methos and I've been around long enough to know better than to discount vampires and demons as fairy tales."

Buffy took his hand and shook it. "Buffy Summers, the former Slayer, now vampire."

Methos eyebrows shot up in surprise. "What makes you think you're a vampire?"

Buffy shrugged. "How else do you explain me standing here in one piece? Dying and not staying dead generally means you've become one

of the undead."

"Not in your case." He turned to Duncan who was eyeing them both as if he thought they were trying to play a trick on him. "I thought you explained to her that she was immortal now?"

"I did." Duncan answered defensively. "How was I supposed to know she was crazy and thought she was a vampire?"

"I'm not?" Buffy asked with a frown. "Are you sure? But then why am I not dead?"

"Because you're an Immortal. Haven't you been listening?" Duncan asked with a long-suffering sigh. "You were born that way. Immortals age and grow just like normal humans, up until their first death. From then on they remain frozen in time. You can still die - and believe me it's never pleasant - but you won't stay dead unless you lose your head, - literally."

"Their first death?" Buffy asked stunned. Her mind was flying back two years to her encounter with the Master. If what these guys were saying was true, that would mean that she hadn't been getting any older for the last two years. She had been immortal all this time and never even suspected it. "Well, I did feel different after Xander brought me back." she mumbled to herself. "Maybe that's why the Master's hypnosis crap no longer worked on me when I faced him again."

"Who's the Master?" Methos asked her.

"Big bad vampire. Tried to open the Hellmouth about 60 years ago but instead got himself stuck like a cork in a bottle. Tricked me into confronting him, then used my blood to escape after leaving me to drown in a puddle. Angel and Xander found me and Xander revived me with CPR." She explained shortly.

"But if you died, another Slayer should have been called." Methos pointed out.

"There was." she told him curtly. "First Kendra, and after she died Faith." Then she thought of something else. "Wait a minute, I died, again, and according to what you're telling me it won't be the last time. Does that mean that another Slayer will be called each time?"

Methos shook his head. "No, you ceased to be the Slayer as far as the succession is concerned the minute you died the first time. There won't be another one called even if someone were to take your head."

"How can you be sure?" Buffy asked him skeptically.

"It's happened at least once before." Methos told her quietly.

"What happened to her?" Buffy wanted to know. "Is she still around?"

"She lost her head the first time she was challenged by another immortal. Something about a Slayer not being able to kill anything but vampires." Methos shrugged, but Buffy thought that there was a

bitter undertone to his voice.

"You knew her?" Buffy asked.

Methos shot her a surprised look. "I was her teacher." He finally admitted reluctantly. "And unless you plan to suffer her fate, I suggest you stick to Holy Ground. That's the only place an Immortal is safe from Challenges. All your special Slayer talents won't save you if you can't kill your opponent."

"It's not that a Slayer *can't* kill anything other than vampires and demons." She told him. Faith had proved that pretty conclusively. "It's more of a moral restriction."

"I see." Methos said.

Duncan finally got up from his chair and interrupted them. "Time-out here. You're saying that there are real vampires out there that drink people's blood?" Buffy nodded. "Then how come I've never seen or even heard of one in over 400 years?"

"Vampires and Immortals usually stay away from each other as much as possible." Methos told him. "You have Chronos to thank for that. He saw the obvious drawbacks if the vampires ever discovered our true nature, and made sure that they would leave us alone. It helps that vampires can in a way sense Immortals, it marks us as different from regular humans."

"I can see why he didn't want to become some vampire's equivalent of a milk cow, but how did he manage to get them to leave you guys alone?"

Methos shrugged uncomfortably and refused to meet her eyes as he told her quietly: "You really don't want to know."

"That's the first believable thing I have heard this far." Duncan muttered. At Buffy's questioning look, he shook his head. "Just be glad that he's dead. If there ever was a guy that could have been mistaken for a demon, I have it on pretty good authority that it would have been Chronos and his companions." He told her grimly. Buffy saw Methos flinch slightly at Duncan's words and decided that he must have had some unpleasant experiences with Chronos and Co. himself.

She tried to think of some way to change the subject: "So how old are you guys?"

"I was born in 1592 in Scotland." Duncan told her. "Methos here is a little bit older than that."

"How much is a little bit?" She wanted to know.

Duncan seemed surprised when Methos just shrugged and told her. "Actually I'm not sure anymore how old I am exactly. I'm guessing somewhere around 5000 years or so."

Buffy felt her jaw drop open at that. "Wow." was all she managed in response. "And I thought Angel was old." Then it hit her: Angel and the others - they thought that she was dead! "The others! I've got to let them know that I'm all right!"

She spun towards the door only to be intercepted by Duncan catching her arm in his hand. "You can't!" he told her.

"Why not?" she demanded.

"You're dead to them. It'll be much easier for them if you stay dead. Believe me I've seen it often enough. It's almost impossible for regular humans to accept us as what we are." Duncan insisted.

"How do you know my friends wouldn't be able to? You don't know anything about them. They've seen so much, had to accept so many things, what with me being the Slayer and..." Methos interrupted her. "That is exactly why you can never tell them." He told her gravely. "The Watcher's Council must never know about us, about you. What do you think they would do if they found out about your being immortal?"

That stopped her.

Methos continued to press his advantage. "You'll have to stop hunting vampires as well." Seeing the stubborn refusal on her face he amended. "Unless you want to learn how to perpetuate the illusion of being a demon that Chronos used to throw them off our scent. And I don't think you would like his methods."

Buffy looked at him speculatively. "What methods? Can you tell me what they were?"

Duncan broke in: "Even if you should decide to continue hunting for vampires," he stated in a tone that told her he was still not convinced that vampires really existed, "first you need to learn to protect yourself from other Immortals. You need to learn how to handle a sword, how to defend yourself, and if necessary how to kill your opponent. Until you learn that, you should never be without me or Methos for company."

"I have fought with a sword before this." She told him defensively.

"Against a swordsman with hundreds of years of training? Against a man bigger and stronger than you? I doubt that. Or if you did, I doubt that you won." Duncan countered.

Buffy gave him an unfriendly look. "He knew how to handle a sword, and he was bigger than me, even if he wasn't exactly a man." Buffy swallowed hard as images of her sword fight against the soulless Angelus ran through her mind. He had almost killed her at one point, but she had caught his blade between her hands and been able to gain the upper hand.

"And did you kill him?" Duncan's voice seemed to come from very far away.

Buffy remembered the light flashing in Angel's eyes as the curse restored his soul, remembered her incredible relief at having him back. A relief that turned to bitter despair as she saw Acathla opening his mouth, ready to suck the whole world into hell. As she realized that the only way to stop it would be to sacrifice Angel. To put the sword through his body and send Angel, not Angelus, to hell -

after she had just gotten him back.

Even after all this time, even after Angel had found a way to get free, to return to Sunnydale, it still hurt to remember the look on his face, how he had stretched his hand out to her, while she watched the vortex engulf and close around him, and disappear.

"Yeah," she heard herself whisper, wrapping her arms around herself, "I killed him."

* * 4 * *

Xander was getting a bit tired of Giles' continued hem hawing around. "What makes you so sure that Buffy *hasn't* turned into a vampire? What else do you think could have happened to her? Tell me that!"

Giles threw a worried at look at Buffy's mom before he turned to Xander. "Xander I really don't think that this is the best time or place to speculate about that..."

"No, don't hold back on my account!" Joyce interrupted him. "I am *tired* of being left out of things, of being brushed off, of being told that I wouldn't understand! I want to know what has happened to my daughter!"

Giles shot another irritated look at Xander before he turned to Mrs. Summers. "We really don't know anything for sure except that Buffy died and that her body later disappeared from the hospital morgue. Anything beyond that is pure speculation."

"I know that! My husband just got through explaining that very fact at quite some length, and the police officer was nice enough to run through all the more mundane explanations like organ harvesting, obscure cults, and medical research facilities. He even threw in teenage pranksters for good measure, so you can spare yourself the trouble of repeating any of those."

Joyce had her arms folded tightly in front of her chest and was glaring at them all with anger in her eyes. 'As if we were the ones responsible for Buffy's death' Xander thought. And maybe she was right. He kept thinking about what he could have done different, and he suspected all the others were having similar thoughts.

"Yes, well, of - of course there are other - more..." he hesitated for a moment, taking off his glasses and pulling out a handkerchief to clean them, "...supernatural - possibilities. But none of them are exactly..." he slowly replaced his glasses, "...pleasant - to even contemplate."

"Neither is the fact that my daughter is dead." Joyce told him flatly.

"No, no, of course not." Giles pushed his glasses up to massage the bridge of his nose as he closed his eyes.

Xander forced himself to remain quiet, though why they should even try to look for another explanation when it was so clear what had really happened to Buffy...

Giles took a deep breath, then looked up at Joyce. "You of course remember those Zombies that showed up at Buffy's Welcome-Home-Party?"

"You think Buffy has turned into a Zombie?" Joyce interrupted him.

"I didn't say that. You asked me to list different possibilities. That is one. Another is demonic possession. There are certain demons that can temporarily animate a dead body and use it..."

As Giles trailed off Xander remembered Eyghon and the fact that Buffy at one time had a tattoo forced on her that marked her as one of its targets. They had vanquished that demon by tricking him into jumping into Angel's dead body. But what if Angel's demon had only temporarily defeated Eyghon, not totally destroyed it like they had thought? Then both Buffy and Giles might once again be in danger. And Eyghon had preferred dead bodies.

From the wide-eyed look on Willow's face she must have been thinking of the same thing, and not finding it any more to her liking than he did.

"Or she could have turned into a vampire!" Xander broke in impatiently, trying to push the memory of Eyghon away. "Why waste time with trying to think up other possibilities?"

"Not likely." Giles objected. "I don't understand why you are so adamant about that possibility. Buffy was neither bitten, nor did she ingest any vampire blood in turn. Both things requisite to her becoming a vampire."

"Well..." Xander was trying to decide how to tell the others why he was so sure Buffy had turned into a vampire, when he was interrupted.

"No, she wasn't bitten, but I did swallow some of her blood, and Xander is convinced that somehow she swallowed some of mine at the same time." Everyone spun around at the sound of Angel's voice since none of them had noticed him entering the room.

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then Willow asked him in a shocked voice. "But... How...? You... Buffy was dying and you..."

Angel remained quiet, standing in a corner by the door with his arms wrapped around himself as if he was cold, not looking at any of them. He looked haggard, dark shadows painting the hollows of his pale face. Xander felt almost sorry for him.

"Buffy was coughing up blood." Xander told the others. "She kissed him and wouldn't let him pull away when she started coughing again." 'I can't believe I am actually defending the dead guy!' Xander added to himself. "Buffy knew exactly what she was doing."

For a moment everyone stared at him then Giles turned back to Angel. "And you fed her some of your blood?" he asked in a hard voice.

Angel only shook his head, still refusing to look directly at any of

them.

"So Xander is just indulging in his usual hobby of wishful thinking when it comes to Buffy." Cordelia concluded.

"I am not!" Xander protested stung. 'Note to self: next time don't share *anything* with your girlfriend. She'll just throw it back in your face at the worst possible moment!' "You saw what kind of shape Angel was in. All it would have taken was a split lip, or a canker sore, and voila! instant vampire."

"I don't think vampires get canker sores." Willow threw in. "Plus canker sores don't usually bleed, do they?"

"That's not the point Will!" Xander told her impatiently. "The point is that there *is* a good chance that she could be a vampire."

"And that would be a good thing?" Oz asked from where he sat with his arms wrapped around Willow.

"Don't you see? If she *is* a vampire, all we have to do is get Willow to curse her, and things can go back to normal!" Xander couldn't see what was so hard to understand here.

Joyce turned to Giles, desperate hope written on her face. "Is there really a way to get Buffy back?"

"Mrs. Summers we don't know that that is what happened to Buffy. And there is absolutely no guarantee that the curse would work on Buffy." Giles cautioned her.

"Well, I - I could do some research on the curse." Willow looked around hopefully. "I managed to make it work once before, and that was after I had just woken up from having a bookshelf dropped on me, too!"

"Ugh, that was *so* creepy! The way she suddenly started talking in a different language..." Cordelia shuddered delicately.

"Willow, I don't want you to put yourself in any danger," Joyce told her earnestly, "but if this spell will bring back my little girl..."

"But it won't." Angel stated quietly. "The spell won't turn her back into a normal girl, or even back into the Slayer. Even if you managed to restore her soul, she would still have to share her body with the demon, she would still need blood... She would never again be able to go out into the sun, or do any of the things regular girls do. You would condemn her to exactly the kind of life you told me you didn't want for her."

"But..." Willow stammered, her eyes huge in her pale face. "But - we can't just let her run around killing people!"

The vampire's face was a mixture of pain and despair as he stared down at his hands. "I know." He whispered almost inaudibly.

"You would kill her without even seeing if the curse would work first?" Xander cried in disbelief. "I thought you would jump at this chance! Don't you *want* her back?"

He watched Angel flinch at his words. "Doesn't matter what *I* want, remember?" Angel told him, closing his eyes. "What matters is Buffy, and what would be best for her."

Angel opened his eyes again and for the first time looked directly at any of them, his eyes slowly going from face to face. "There is a reason why it's called a curse. Do you have any idea what it's like to have to live with the knowledge that your true nature is that of a monster? A monster that lives for the kill, for the thrill of the hunt, that enjoys hurting people."

His voice was heavy, and he was speaking slowly, obviously searching for the right words to try and make them understand. "To know that the only thing protecting the people you love from that monster is a fragile soul that could be taken away at any moment? That even clinging to your own misery and guilt might not be enough to ensure their safety? That all it would take is some sorcerer with the right spell, and there would be absolutely nothing you could do to prevent him from taking your soul?"

There was a moment's stunned silence, then Willow asked him hesitantly: "Are you mad at me that I restored your soul?"

Angel sighed in defeat and shook his head. "I am no more mad at you than I am mad at Buffy for sending me to hell. It was your best chance to keep me from awakening Acathla. -This is not the same."

"So, are you telling us that we shouldn't try to curse Buffy?" Oz asked slowly.

"I'm just asking you to consider if that is what Buffy would have wanted for herself." Angel answered quietly.

"Well, she is a little hard to reach for comment right now." Oz remarked dryly.

"So... - why not curse her and ask her if she wants to stay that way or get staked?" Cordelia asked as if it was the most reasonable suggestion in the world.

That seemed to settle the issue. As the meeting began to break up Angel laid a hand on Xander's arm to get his attention. At Xander's surprised look he withdrew his hand, but refused to step back.

"What do you want, Angel?" Xander asked him curtly.

"When you're going back to Sunnydale you need to keep an eye on the others, make sure they're safe." Angel told him quietly. "It would be best if you all stayed indoors after dark, especially Willow and Buffy's mom. Don't for a minute forget that this isn't Buffy you're dealing with, but an extremely dangerous vampire. She'll come after all of you, but if she guesses about your intention to curse her, she'll go after Willow first, figuring her for the most immediate danger."

"You're not coming back to Sunnydale?" 'So the coward really *is* going to skip out on all of us, including Buffy', Xander thought resentfully. "You may not like the idea of having another vampire

with a soul around, since that would cheapen your own uniqueness, but don't you think that after having turned her into a vampire the least you can do is see this through to the end?"

For a moment Angel just stared at him, an unreadable expression on his face, then he slowly shook his head. "There is no guarantee that Buffy will go to Sunnydale. Her father lives here in LA. He has no idea what's going on. Someone needs to keep an eye on him in case Buffy decides to come after him."

Yeah, likely excuse! "But you'll come to Sunnydale if she shows up there?" Xander asked suspiciously.

"If you need my help." Angel replied shortly.

Xander gave a contemptuous snort. "You could at least hang around long enough to show Buffy the ropes. You know, where to get the best blood... what the going price is for a pint... that kind of thing."

Angel looked at him for a moment then stared past him at nothing. "Buffy may not want me around. She always wished that she could lead a normal life, and now I have taken any chance of that away from her. Even *she* may not be able to forgive me for that."

Without another word Angel turned away and left.

* * 5 * *

Cassandra lifted the pitcher of chilled wine and filled the clay goblet sitting on the ground in front of her as she heard the thunder of returning hoof beats. Then went to pour some of the water heating over the fire into the cauldron sitting inside the tent until the water already in it was just hot enough to be still comfortable. Fragrant steam began to fill the tent from the herbs she had added both for their strengthening properties and their pleasant smell. She heard footsteps nearing the tent and sat back on her heels expectantly. The entrance flap parted and admitted a slim, tall man. His face was covered with the skull helmet that had earned him the name the world knew him by: Death. Not until the tent flap swung closed behind him, did he allow his proud bearing to soften showing the weariness he felt after returning from a successful raid.

Cassandra's mind shied away from where he had been and what he and his brothers had undoubtedly done as he took off his mask and carelessly threw it to the side. Instead she picked up the goblet and offered it to him. "I chilled it in the stream."

He accepted it wordlessly and sipped at it slowly, while she removed his dusty clothing and began to wash the sweat and dirt off his body. She hesitated before washing his face, giving him a questioning look. Half of his face was painted a bright blue. A mask worn directly on his skin. Methos allowed very few people to see him without a mask of some kind to hide behind. Cassandra didn't think that anyone besides herself ever got to see his gentler, almost tender side, and then only in the privacy of their tent. And for good reason. Any sign of weakness, any sign that he didn't revel in the brutality and blood the way his brothers did, could get him killed or worse.

He made no move to avoid the wet cloth and she carefully removed all trace of blue from his face. When he reached out a hand to run it through her long black hair she felt herself shiver with anticipation.

Abruptly the dream shifted. The man running possessive hands over her body was not Methos but Chronos with the other Horsemen standing just beyond, their leering faces laughing at her in anticipation of what was to come. In helpless terror she cried out for Methos to save her, fighting against Chronos' hands with all her might. Suddenly he was there, his face smeared with blue paint, a knife held in his right hand. Relief made her knees weak. He had come. He would save her. She was his property, and he would protect what was his as long as she pleased him. She felt a sharp pain and stared down in disbelief at Methos' knife protruding from her breast. She looked up at him in horror. All around her she could hear the screams of her people dying. Behind her the Healer's hut that had been her home ever since Hijad had adopted her as his apprentice when she was little more than three years old went up in flames.

And there in front of her stood Methos, the fourth Horseman, the one they called Death, holding a knife to her stepfather's throat.

"You forgot who I am!" he told her his eyes as cold as ice as he slowly drew his knife blade across Hijad's throat. Blood poured down over his hands, pooling around Cassandra's feet, turning into a raging river as she desperately struggled to keep her head above water. With the last bit of her strength she pulled herself up onto the trunk of a tree floating by. A tree that felt strangely soft beneath her hands. It wasn't a piece of wood she was crouching on, it was the dead body of her adopted father, his sightless eyes fixing her with an accusing stare.

A scream tore from her raw throat as she abruptly sat up in her bed struggling with her sweat-soaked blankets. A dream, it had been just a dream! Tears were pouring down her cheeks and she lifted a shaky hand to try and wipe them away. Would this nightmare never end? Would she never be free of Chronos and her memories of her time with the Horsemen? They were dead! She had seen Chronos and Silas die with her own eyes and Duncan had reassured her that he himself had taken Caspian's head. They were dead! Why did they still haunt her?

'Because one of them is still alive. They aren't all dead. You'll never be free until they all are.' Methos. Methos was still alive. She had had the perfect chance to kill him just after he had taken Silas head. He had been kneeling in front of her, crying, still weak and shaking from the aftereffects of the powerful Quickening he had shared with Duncan as they had taken Silas' and Chronos' heads at the same time. And she had let him live. Because Duncan had asked her to? Because he had killed Silas to keep him from taking her head? Because she had began to believe Duncan when he said that Methos had changed over the last thousand years? She no longer knew why she had spared him, only that she had.

And ever since then she had been plagued by nightmares of her times as Methos' slave.

She disentangled herself from the clammy sheets and stepped into the shower.

She turned her head up into the spray hoping that the water would wash away the memories and the filth she felt was clinging to her inside and out.

She finally turned off the water and stepped out of the shower. This had to end. One way or another this had to end, before the constant nightmares drove her insane.

Wrapping a soft cotton robe around herself she walked across the living room and entered her study. The smell of dried herbs and musty books greeted her, soothing her frayed nerves. She picked up a shallow bowl, it's inside glazed a shiny black, and set it carefully down in the middle of a round wooden table artfully decorated with a myriad of symbols and runes. Murmuring the required spell under her breath she sprinkled a mixture of herbs and minerals into the bottom of the bowl then carefully filled it with rainwater to its very brim. Careful not to let her long hair fall forward and touch the bowl she leaned over the table and softly breathed one last word onto the surface of the water. Remaining absolutely still she waited. As the ripples faded, the surface of the water silvered over and pictures began to dance across its still surface.

There he was. He was fighting. His opponent was a petite blond girl.

Cassandra didn't recognize her or the fighting style she was using, but it seemed surprisingly effective against the older Immortal, who not only had the advantage of a man's greater strength, but of a longer reach as well. As she watched the girl turned one of Methos' cuts to her throat away from herself and followed up with a swift kick to Methos' side that connected solidly, sending him stumbling, but to Cassandra's frustration, she didn't follow up on her advantage. Instead she waited with her sword raised in front of her until Methos had a chance to recover his balance and regroup.

"You have to try harder than that!" Methos told the blonde in front of him panting slightly from the exertion of the fight. "Never pass up such an obvious advantage."

'He is right, girl.' Cassandra found herself agreeing with Methos' remark. 'Kill him while you have the chance. You never know when you will get another one.'

She winced as Methos sent the little girl stumbling and his sword darted forward like a snake burying itself up to the hilt in the blonde's chest. She saw the girl's eyes widen in disbelief as she stared at the sword protruding from her chest before she slid off his sword and fell to the ground, dead.

Cassandra waited for Methos to complete the fight by taking her head, but instead he simply picked up a rag to wipe the blood off his sword and sat back, waiting for his opponent to revive.

He didn't have to wait long. As the blonde girl sat back up with a gasp he greeted her with a cynical: "Surprise! You're not dead."

"That's another shirt of mine you've ruined!" The girl complained. "What is it with you and killing people? I thought you were supposed

to teach me how to fight."

"I am. I am trying to teach you how to stay alive. And I will kill you as many times as it takes for you to learn this lesson." At the sound of those words delivered so dispassionately in Methos voice, an uncontrollable shiver ran through Cassandra. One strand of her hair fell forward and obliterated the picture dancing across the surface of the bowl, but she never even noticed.

All she saw in her mind's eye was the day Methos had first brought her into his tent. She had stared at the rip in her clothing and at the unmarked skin beneath it, not understanding why there was not even a scar to mark where the sword had pierced her belly.

"You live because I wish it." Methos had told her running his hand up her thigh. "And you stay alive as long as you please me." She had slapped his hand away.

"That did not please me." He had told her evenly pulling out his knife. "I am Methos. You live only to serve me. Never forget that." She had cringed back from him as he turned the knife in front of her face. "You died once today. Did you enjoy that?" With that he had stabbed her, no emotion on his face, not even anger. "Learn this lesson well. I will kill you as many times as it takes to tame you."

MacLeod was wrong. Methos hadn't changed at all. He was still the same monster he had been three thousand years ago. He had fooled her back then with his pretense at kindness, he was fooling Duncan now. But she knew him. Knew the truth of the kind of monster he was underneath his mask of civilized behavior.

Those nightmares had been a message meant to remind her of who he really was. She was the only one still alive that knew him from his days as a Horseman. It was up to her to put an end to his existence and with it an end to the nightmares that haunted her.

* * 6 * *

Duncan MacLeod looked up as his Watcher hung up the phone and ran a hand over his face. He noticed the way he was leaning heavily on his walking cane and ventured: "Bad news?"

"You could say that." Joe answered tiredly.

As the older man made his way over to the sofa Duncan got up from his chair and went to get two cold bottles of beer. He opened them both and handed one to Joe, who accepted it gratefully.

"Do you want to talk about it, or is it Watcher business?" Duncan asked as he leaned back against the kitchen counter separating the living room from the kitchen area.

Joe gave him a long look then finally shrugged and took a sip of his beer. "It is, but I think maybe you should know about this one."

Duncan waited patiently for Joe to decide how much he could tell him.

Watchers, well, watched and recorded everything their assigned Immortal did, but also had to take an oath never to interfere in any way. Duncan hadn't even been aware of their existence until a renegade segment of the Watchers had begun to systematically hunt down and kill Immortals. He had met up with Joe Dawson under these less than auspicious circumstances, but despite everything they had slowly become friends. Duncan had very few mortal friends that knew and understood what it meant to be Immortal, to live the kind of life he had lived, and he was unwilling to lose Joe as a friend, just because he was a Watcher. So Duncan had learned to minimize the potential conflict by doing his best not to press him when it came to Watcher business.

"Two other Immortals arrived here in LA. recently." Joe told him quietly. "One of them is your friend Cassandra. She arrived two days ago. Her Watcher says that she is pretty strung out, but he doesn't know why. It may have something to do with the other Immortal that got here about a week ago. His name is Helmut Haller. Young Immortal, less than 100 years old. Grew up in Germany. Guess who his teacher was."

"Cassandra?" Duncan ventured.

Joe shook his head. "Try your old friend Xavier St.Cloud."

Duncan frowned. "So why would Cassandra be upset because of him?"

Joe took a long drink from his beer. "Marcus Aurelius lost his head, four weeks ago, to Haller."

"Marcus, the monk?" Duncan shook his head in disbelief. "But... he left the monastery?"

Joe shook his head slowly.

"Then how? No Immortal can take another's head on Holy Ground!"

Joe let out a sigh. "Haller found a way around that. As far as we can piece together, he stabbed Marcus on his way to midnight mass, then dragged his body off Holy Ground and took his head."

"He waited for him to revive and forced him to fight?" Duncan guessed.

Joe shook his head. "He's decided that taking head's is much easier when the other can't actually fight back." Joe ran a hand through his short gray hair, clearly unhappy with what he had to tell Duncan. "Another of his tactics is to watch two Immortals fight, then take the winner's head before he has a chance to recover from the Quickenings." He took another swig of his beer. "Next he'll start using guns, so he can drop his targets without ever coming within fighting distance. Xavier certainly had no scruples about letting other people shoot down his targets so that he could take their heads. It's a small step from that, to shooting them down yourself." Joe's voice was bitter.

Duncan looked at Joe in disbelief. "You think he knew about Xavier's alliance with the renegade Watchers?"

"Maybe not directly, but you know what kind of methods Xavier used to employ to 'raise money' to support himself." Joe swirled the rest of his beer around in his bottle.

Xavier's favorite way to 'raise money' had been to rob a store or bank by flooding it with poison gas, not caring that he as well as many innocent humans would get killed in the process. After he revived he would simply disappear with his spoils before the police showed up. It had been MacLeod that had hunted him down and taken his head, finally putting an end to his endeavors.

"So you think that Cassandra is hunting Haller for what he did to Marcus?" Duncan asked, then cocked his head to one side as he felt the presence of another Immortal coming closer.

Not being able to sense Immortals, Joe continued oblivious to the fact that they were about to have company. "She has used her hypnotic voice before this to take down an Immortal for cheating at the Game." Joe Dawson shrugged. "I am more concerned about why Helmut decided to come here, now. He may be hunting you or Methos, or both. You might want to start wearing a bullet proof vest."

During this last part of his speech the door opened to admit Methos and a rather disheveled looking Buffy, and MacLeod allowed himself to relax.

Catching the last bit of Joe's speech Buffy asked: "Why would MacLeod need a bullet proof vest? Did he snitch some of Methos' favorite cookies?"

Duncan winced in sympathy as Buffy unzipped her jacket revealing several blood-encrusted rents in the shirt beneath it. Methos certainly didn't believe in pulling any punches when training a new student.

"There is a young Immortal in town that may be interested in taking a couple heads the easy way, not bothering to follow the rules." he told them.

"Well, that's it then." Methos said with a resigned sigh. "Time to pack up and move on."

Buffy stared at him in disbelief. "You can't be serious! You're just going to run?"

"How do you think I got to be as old as I am? He who runs away, lives to fight another day." Methos told her flippantly.

"What if he just runs after you?" Buffy wanted to know.

"Ah! But you see, first he has to figure out where I went, and then he has to catch me, which isn't as easy as it sounds." Methos told her with a mocking smile. "He may well decide to go after easier prey instead."

"And that makes it better how?" Buffy persisted.

Methos just looked at her, momentarily lost for words, then he threw up his hands and demanded: "What do you want me to do? Hunt him down and kill him? Have a strict talk with him on the evils of cheating,

while he tries to kill me so he can chop off my head? Sorry to disappoint you, Buffy, but I don't like either scenario."

"Well, there has to be something we can do besides run!" Buffy said frustrated.

Duncan held up his hand to gain their attention. "We can stay." As he saw Methos open his mouth to protest he added quickly. "And prepare, so if he *does* come after one of us, we're ready." Then he threw them a quick grin. "I bet he isn't expecting three Immortals backing each other up. If we work together we should be able to take him without any problems."

Methos didn't look exactly happy, but all he said was: "Well, in that case you better make your afternoon training session with Buffy count." He turned to Buffy and looked at her seriously. "If you hesitate during a fight with this Helmut, you could get *all* of us killed, not just yourself."

* * *

Duncan felt the sweat trickle down his back as he strained to push back Buffy's wooden practice blade with his own. Methos had warned him against underestimating her because of her petite stature, saying something about special Slayer strength and reflexes, but Duncan had been sure that the older Immortal had been exaggerating Buffy's prowess.

Well, he had learned better. Even though she obviously knew little of the finer points of sword work, she made up for that with lightning-quick reflexes and an intuitive mind that let her anticipate her opponent's next move. With a few years of formal training she could become a truly formidable fighter.

"So, how come you teach so differently from Methos? I don't mean to complain here. Dying three times in one day is more than enough if you ask me." Buffy asked him as their bare feet beat out a staccato rhythm on the wooden practice floor of the dojo that one of Methos' friends had given over for their use. "Just wondering."

Duncan found himself wondering instead where she got enough breath to keep up a casual conversation. "Everyone develops their own style over time." He kept his answer short trying to conserve his own breath.

"I just don't understand why he keeps on killing me. What does he hope to accomplish with that - besides ruining my shirts?" Buffy faked a kick at his right leg while bringing her sword around in a clean swing aimed at the back of his neck. Not a bad move, but Duncan saw it coming and quickly spun to avoid her blade and in the same movement brought his own sword around in an overhand swing aimed at her neck. Instead of countering it, Buffy simply dropped and rolled, at the same time she scissored her legs around his, sending him crashing to the floor.

They both regained their feet quickly and returned to a wary circling.

"I think after what happened with that other Slayer he had as a student, he is just worried that when it comes right down to it you

won't be able to actually kill your opponent, that you'll hold back." Duncan explained to her. "I guess he wants to drive home the point that running another Immortal through with a sword only kills them temporarily until you can bring yourself to do it yourself."

"Are you saying that all he is trying to do, is get me to kill him so he knows that I can do that to another Immortal?" Buffy asked doubtfully all the while keeping a sharp eye on his sword.

"I think so." Duncan agreed with her conclusion.

"Well, he could have just said so, instead of ruining one of my favorite shirts." Buffy complained then added with a grin. "But I've already figured out a way to stop *that*."

"Oh? And how are you going to do that?" Duncan asked, moving in to attack her.

Dropping to one knee, she caught his wooden blade on her own. "Simple: The next time he asks me to practice I'll just wear one of *his* shirts!" She grinned up at him.

Duncan was surprised into laughter and Buffy was quick to take advantage of his distraction. Disengaging with a graceful turn, she rose and swung her blade around until it rested against the back of his neck.

"Ha! You're dead." she informed him gleefully. Then she stepped back and turned her practice blade thoughtfully in her hands. "It's kind of fun fighting with a sword. Maybe I should start using a sword instead of stakes when I go on patrol. Of course that means having to behead them to get them to dust, but that might be good practice." Buffy mused. "Maybe if I used a wooden one like these practice blades... but then I might be in trouble if an Immortal with a real sword showed up."

Duncan shook his head as he picked up a towel to wipe the sweat off his face. Despite everything Methos and Buffy had told him he was still having a hard time believing that vampires actually existed.

"Why don't you practice some of those sword forms I showed you earlier on your own?" he suggested as he headed for the showers. "I'll be back later to pick you up and drive you back to Methos apartment."

"Don't bother. I can catch a bus or a taxi." Duncan frowned at the casualness in her tone belied by the excited sparkle in her eye, but was distracted by her next question. "So, are you going to see that lady friend of yours Joe mentioned?"

"Joe told you about Cassandra? Was Methos there?" He much rather the two of them didn't know the other was in the LA. as well.

"No, just me. Why?" Buffy wanted to know.

"Let's just say that the two of them aren't exactly the best of friends." Duncan temporized. "Are you sure you don't want me to pick you up later?"

Buffy just shook her head. "I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself. Go find your girlfriend."

"She is not my 'girlfriend'." Duncan protested a bit defensively. "Just my friend."

"What ever." Buffy shrugged. "Go, have a good time." Then she added with a smile: "Tell her hi from me."

Shaking his head Duncan left the dojo and headed for the showers.

* * * * *

Buffy forced herself to count to twenty after the door closed behind MacLeod before she quickly headed into the office attached to the dojo. Throwing a nervous look around she quickly picked up the telephone sitting on the desk and dialed Willow's number, all the while straining her ears to keep track of MacLeod by the sounds emanating from the changing rooms.

> She waited impatiently for her red headed friend to answer, but the phone just kept on ringing. With a frustrated snarl she disconnected and tried Giles. Busy. Who else could she call? Her mother was likely to freak if she heard the voice of her dead daughter. She didn't know either Cordelia's or Angel's phone number, assuming he even had a phone. That left only Xander. <p>

Buffy breathed a sigh of relief as he picked up the phone on the third ring.

"Xander Harris."

"Xander, its me, Buffy. You'll never believe what's happened to me! Its amazing." She told him hurriedly, craning her neck to look out into the dojo. MacLeod would not be happy if he caught her talking to her friends on the phone. She better make this quick.

"Buffy." There was a stunned silence for a moment, then Xander continued. "Actually I kind of guessed what must have happened to you after I heard that your body had disappeared from the morgue. Where are you?"

"I'm still in LA. I've hooked up with two older guys that are teaching me all the stuff I need to know to survive in my new life. Would you believe that one of them is almost 5000 years old? That's what he says anyway." Buffy heard a choking noise, and grinned. "Being the Slayer practically guaranteed me an early grave. So this whole immortality deal takes some getting used to." She forced herself to take a deep breath. 'Better get to the point,' she reminded herself, 'MacLeod could come back any minute'. "I just wanted to let you know that I'm still around and that I'm planing on coming back to Sunnydale as soon as I can. You might want to warn Willow and the others."

"Warn them about what?" Xander asked sounding a bit grim.

Buffy frowned, he didn't sound all that happy to hear from her. "That I'll be back. I wouldn't want them to just keel over from a heart attack when they see me."

"Of course not. What would be the fun in that? Don't worry, I'll make

sure they are ready for you." Xander reassured her. "I promised that I'd look after them, didn't I?"

"Thanks, Xander." She heard the shower stop and quickly asked: "How's Angel? And do you know where he lives in LA? I'd like to pay him a visit before I leave here."

"Planing on giving him a bit of his own medicine, huh?" Xander laughed. "Would serve him right after the way he behaved."

"What are you talking about?" Had he and Angel gotten into a fight?

Before he had a chance to answer she heard one of the locker doors close. "I've got to go Xander." she told him hurriedly. "I'll talk to you again when I get the chance."

She dropped the receiver back into its cradle and hurried back into the middle of the practice room. She barely had time to assume the first stance of the sword exercise before MacLeod stepped through the door. He watched her for a few moments while she pretended to be to absorbed in her movements to notice him, then nodded and quietly left the dojo.

She ran through the whole form to make sure he had really gone. Then repeated it twice more just to be on the safe side, all the while trying to puzzle out what Xander could have been talking about.

Finally sure that he was really gone, she tried to call Xander back. The more she thought about it, the stranger the whole conversation sounded to her, and she wanted to reassure herself that everything was all right. No answer, the phone just kept on ringing. He must have left to inform the others that she wasn't dead after all.

Now what? She picked up the phone book to see if there were any listings for a Cordelia Chase. Nothing.

Well, she would just have to go out and start looking in all the places vampires liked to hang around and hope that she might run into Angel somewhere along the way. Otherwise she could always try to find a vampire that knew where Angel usually hung out and convince him to share that knowledge with her.

* * 7 * *

Cassandra gathered in the assortment of carved bones, stones and seed pods that lay scattered on the dark red piece of leather spread out on the floor in front of her and carefully replaced them in the carved wooden box sitting beside her. This was the third time she had done it, and despite slight variations the main answer remained the same.

Holy Ground. That was where she should confront her enemy. The only place she would be able to defeat him.

It didn't make any sense. But every time the Bones had given her the same answer three times in a row, it had turned out to be the right one, even if she didn't understand the answer at first. The few times she had gone against the advice of the Bones, she had come to regret

it.

Massaging her temples she slowly walked into her kitchen to pour herself a cup of tea when she suddenly felt the presence on another Immortal. She stepped over to the window just in time to see a dark haired man get out of his car and walk over to the door of her building. He looked up and saw her standing at the window and greeted her with a friendly smile and a wave of his hand.

Duncan MacLeod. What was he doing here? If he knew that she was hunting Methos he would certainly try and talk her out of it. She didn't know what Methos could have done to earn MacLeod's loyalty, but she was very well aware that once earned it wasn't easily shaken. It had been severely tested when he had found out about what kind of a person Methos had been in the past, but in the end Methos had managed to trick MacLeod into thinking that he had changed. Cassandra knew better. She knew that deep down inside he was still the same monster that had been proud to be one of the Four Horsemen. That had reveled in the terror the mere mention of his name struck in even the bravest heart.

She wouldn't let MacLeod stop her, she decided. She retrieved a small vial holding a fine white powder and poured it in the bottom of the light blue teacup sitting on the countertop before replacing it in the cupboard. If MacLeod tried to interfere, all she had to do was pour some tea over it and get him to drink it.

* * * * *

Cassandra's Watcher had been right, was Duncan first thought when Cassandra invited him into her little apartment. Something had her very much on edge. She seemed tense, and the air around her slim figure seemed almost to crackle with power. For one heartbeat he was taken back in time and felt again like the ten-year-old boy standing in front of the Witch of Donan Woods. She hadn't changed, she still had that same air of mystery and power that had caused his people to label her a witch. With a shake of his head he recalled himself to the present. He was over 400 years old now and this was the twentieth century. No one in their right mind believed in witches anymore.

"Nice place you got here." he told her looking around at the many intricately carved bowls and implements as well as the dried herbs that decorated her small living room.

Cassandra shrugged. "It is small, but it's home. One of several I have scattered around the world. Do you still own that little house in Glenfinnan?"

Duncan shook his head. "I gave it to a friend of mine that was in need of a place for his wife and family about a fifty years ago. I visited their grandkids a couple years back. It was nice to see the children run around the yard. So, what brings you to LA?"

Cassandra gave him a sharp look from under hooded eyes. "Hunting." she told him shortly.

Duncan looked down at his hands. So, Joe had guessed right. She was after Haller.

"I know who you're hunting, and I really don't like the idea of you going after him." He said slowly. He didn't want to give her the impression that he thought that she couldn't take care of herself, but Haller sounded more than a little dangerous. Methos kept picking on him for his outmoded chivalrous notions, telling him that women were no more helpless and in need of protection than men, and most certainly no less dangerous, quite the opposite in fact. But Duncan couldn't help the way he felt. And it wasn't just women that made him want to protect them. As the son of the Chieftain of the Clan MacLeod he had been raised to feel a keen responsibility for his people. Now 'his people' were his friends, and he still felt obligated to take care of them.

He watched Cassandra take down two teacups, one light blue, the other a deep sea green, and fill them from the tea pot she had simmering on the stove.

"Did you know Marcus Aurelius well?" he asked her as he accepted the light blue cup she handed him.

"He sheltered me from the Spanish Inquisition once." she told him as she led the way over to the table. Her eyes became unfocused as she looked back into the distant past.

"I had stopped in a small village. One of the women there was in labor and had been for more than a day. There was no midwife in town, and none of the women there knew how to turn the baby so it would lay head down instead of sideways in her belly."

Duncan followed her and sat down taking a sip of his tea. "You helped?"

She nodded and gave him a bitter smile. "I should have known better. I didn't know it at the time, but they didn't have a midwife because the Inquisition had taken her away on suspicion of witchcraft." She turned her own cup between her long fingers staring into its depths. "Actually I did know better, but I couldn't just stand by and let her and the baby die."

"How did the Inquisitors find out about it?" he asked her quietly.

She gave an almost mocking laugh. "Would you believe it was the girl's parents themselves? They were suddenly afraid of the 'miraculous delivery' of their daughter."

"So they informed against you." He concluded taking a long swallow of his hot tea.

"That wasn't all they did. They were so desperately afraid, they killed both the mother and the child, saying that that was what God had wanted to happen to them before the devil's witch interfered." She rubbed her hands along her upper arms. "They were arguing whether I would be burned at the stake or drawn and quartered, when the girl's sister snuck up to my room to warn me. I barely made it into the woods ahead of the Inquisitors. They would have captured me if it hadn't been for Aurelius."

"I can understand that you want to hunt down his murderer." He didn't notice the sharp look she gave him, silently mouthing the word

'murderer', as he sighed and took another drink from his cup. He could almost feel the tea's warmth spreading through his whole body, relaxing his tense muscles. "But you have to remember that this is a very dangerous man. I am not sure that you should risk going after him. Especially on your own."

"Are you offering to help?" Cassandra asked a bit surprised. "I thought you still considered Methos to be your friend."

"He is." Duncan confirmed a bit confused by her sudden change of subject. "How did you know he was in LA?"

Cassandra took a drink from her own cup before she finally answered in a bitter voice. "I saw him. He was killing a little blond girl, pretending that he was teaching her."

"Buffy." Duncan frowned. The teacup had suddenly gotten a lot heavier. "He had her - not her - another like her - as a student. She got killed..." His thoughts were becoming muddled and he was having a hard time trying to put them into words that made any sense. "...wants to make up for it. Not fail her..." The room was slowly beginning to spin around him and he gripped the table with both hands trying to keep himself upright. "What...?"

"I'm sorry, Duncan, but I couldn't let you get in the way. Methos has to pay for what he did." Cassandra's voice sounded like she was talking to him through a tunnel. It took a moment before he could make sense of her words.

"No!" He told her putting everything he had left into the effort to get the words out clearly. "Not Methos! Haller!" Then darkness closed around him and he no longer knew where he was.

* * * * *

Cassandra stared down at MacLeod's slumped form. What had he meant with that last comment? Who or what was Haller?

Then she pushed the question aside and instead went to get a sturdy length of rope and began to tie him securely to the chair. That taken care of, she set up her scrying bowl and tried to locate Methos' blond student. It would be better if she got her safely out of the way as well before she went to face Methos for the last time.

* * 8 * *

Angel stood and stared out over the moonlit ocean. He listened to the soothing rhythm of the surf as the waves licked over his bare feet, slowly washing sand and small shells up between his toes. He loved the ocean. People came and went, changing the land with their ideas and their buildings, but the ocean remained the same.

Always before he had been able to draw some peace from that.

He had come here to let the ocean work its healing magic once again. But instead of soothing him the ocean's vastness only seemed to emphasize his loneliness.

He wrapped his arms around himself in an effort to stave off the cold that was creeping into his body and soul. A cold that had nothing to

do with the wind tugging on his shirt or the waves that were slowly burying his feet with cold, wet sand.

"Angel?"

His head whipped around in disbelief at the sound of that voice, hoping against hope.

She was there. Beautiful and golden, glowing like the sun, though with a less deadly light.

"Buffy?" He stretched out one hand, afraid. Afraid that she was nothing but a ghost, that she would disappear as soon as he touched her. He didn't want her to disappear, yet he couldn't seem to stop his hand from reaching out to her.

With a smile she stepped closer and took his hand in hers.

He drew in a sharp breath as the heat of her touch raced through him, banishing the cold ice that filled his veins. Unable to resist the lure of her life, needing to reassure himself that she was solid, that she was really there, he pulled her closer. Wrapping his arms around her, he buried his face in her hair, drinking in the smell of her, the feel of her in his arms, the sound of her steady heartbeat against his own silent chest.

"Buffy." He whispered half expecting her to vanish at any moment. "I thought you were dead!"

She looked up at him, her eyes filled with love. "That didn't stop me the last time!"

Something between a sob and a laugh was ripped from his throat as he slowly ran one hand through her soft blond hair.

With a smile she reached up and firmly pulled his lips down to hers.

His whole world narrowed down to the small figure wrapped safely in his arms. He lost the ability to think, there was nothing beyond his longing, his need for her presence, her touch, her love.

Suddenly the sweet, intoxicating taste of her blood filled his mouth. He tried to pull away, but her arms were like the steel bars of a cage, keeping him trapped. He fought desperately against her grip, against the agonizing glory of her blood pouring down his throat, suffusing his very being with the magic of her life.

Finally her arms relaxed and he was able to pull free. In horror he stared down at the broken and bleeding body in his hands. And still she smiled at him. "Live. Be happy." She told him even as the life faded from her eyes.

"She was just a little girl." He looked up into the accusing eyes of Joyce Summers, Buffy's mother. "You had no right to take that away from her."

"She is dead because of you." Xander said coming to stand besides Mrs. Summers. "She never would have gone into that warehouse if it hadn't been for you."

"I didn't want her to come after me." Angel protested weakly. "I left her so she would be free of me and the danger I bring her, so she could be happy."

"You broke her heart." Willow accused, stepping up next to Xander. "You left her, because you knew it would hurt her."

"That's not true! I did it to put an end to the pain!" He vehemently denied Willow's accusation, then added in a whisper. "Hers... and mine." But it hadn't put an end to his pain.

"Do you think that you deserve that?" Giles asked, wrapping one arm around Mrs. Summers shoulders. "An end to your pain?"

Angel closed his eyes. No, no he didn't, and he knew it. He deserved this pain and more. But not Buffy. She didn't deserve any of the pain he had caused her, and she certainly didn't deserve to die like this. "I don't want her to be dead." he whispered.

The sound of mocking laughter caused his eyes to pop open. Darla, the blond vampire who had sired him, pointed a finger at the broken figure in his arms. "Be careful what you wish for..." She licked her lips a predatory smile spreading across her face. "...you just might get it!"

Angel looked down at Buffy's body and froze as her wounds healed in front of his eyes. Her forehead became ridged and two sharp teeth peeked out at the corners of her mouth.

He shook his head in denial even as her eyes flew open to pin him with a feral, yellow stare.

"Oh, no!" he whispered dismayed.

"Oh, yes!" Buffy countered. Her right hand shot out sending him flying backwards through the air. His head impacted against something hard and he found himself sitting on the ground unable to move. Unable to do anything but watch as Buffy proceeded to kill her mother and friends one by one, even as they desperately tried to cast the spell that would restore her soul.

Angel fought to move, to stop Buffy, but the air around him seemed like thick glue, slowing all his movements to an agonizing crawl. He watched her drain her own mother and discard her like a rag. Watched her break Giles' neck with a sharp twist and drop him with a satisfied smirk.

The closer he got to her, the slower he seemed to move. Helpless horror filled him. He watched her pull Xander into a deep kiss even as her hands took a hold of his throat and choked the life out of him.

"Run, Willow!" His desperate scream went unheeded as the red haired Hacker continued to recite the curse. Buffy bent down and picked up a sword laying at her feet. She turned and saluted him with it, a mocking smile on her lips, before she spun around and buried it in Willow's chest.

Willow hesitated in her spell casting, staring down at the sword

protruding from her breast.

Buffy spun back around to confront Angel. "Your turn, lover!" Behind her Willow gasped out the last words of the curse and collapsed into a lifeless heap. A golden glow lit Buffy's eyes, and she convulsed with pain.

He stood frozen in place, unable to move no matter how hard he strained against the invisible walls holding him. He watched her look up, saw the horror spread across her face as she took in the sight of her dead friends. Then her head whipped around. The eyes that stared into his were filled with a cold hatred. "You did this!" she screamed at him. "This is all your fault!"

Slowly she picked herself up off the ground and began to stalk towards him. "I'll make you pay for this. Before I am through with you, you'll wish that you were back in hell instead!"

With a gasp Angel started up as the telephone beside his bed began to ring.

He lifted a shaky hand and rubbed at the cold sweat covering his brow, then wiped his hands on his blanket before finally reaching over to answer the phone.

"Yeah?" His voice sounded strange in his own ears.

"A-angel?" Rupert Giles voice was filled with barely suppressed excitement.

"Here." Angel answered with a sigh.

"It appears that Xander might have been right." Giles told him. "She called him less than an hour ago. It seems that she is still in LA and that she might be planning to pay you a little visit before making her way here to Sunnydale."

"Buffy?" Angel shivered at the thought of Buffy as a vampire.

"Yes." Giles confirmed. "She told Xander that she had found herself a pair of teachers and that one of them is 5000 years old! Do you have any idea where in LA he might be found?"

"No, I have never even heard of a vampire that old." Angel answered him trying to ignore the mass of contradictory emotions churning his stomach. "Are you sure about the age?"

"Xander insists that that is what Buffy told him. Whether or not that is the truth..." Angel could almost see him shrug. "I thought it best to warn you, just in case. I've been looking in my books, but so far no mention of any vampires that old."

Angel forced himself to take a deep, calming breath. "Maybe it isn't a vampire. It could be some other kind of demon." He wondered if it could be Whistler. He had no idea how old he was, but he had seemed very interested in Buffy before.

"You're right of course." Giles remarked sounding a bit chagrined. "I will widen our research."

"I'll see what I can find out around here." Angel offered. "See if I can find her, or her teachers."

"Do be careful, Angel. We really don't have any idea what we're dealing with here." Giles reminded him. "And if you do find her..."

"I'll let you know." The nightmare he had just woken from still fresh in his mind he added: "Don't forget to be careful yourselves. This is not Buffy you're dealing with. For her sake as well as your own, make sure that she doesn't kill any of you before you have a chance to try that curse."

A thrill ran through him as he hung up the phone. Buffy wasn't dead.

For the last few days he had swung between the unreasonable feeling that Buffy was still out there, somewhere, not only alive, but her own sweet self, and the crushing conviction that she was dead, lost to him forever. Three times this morning alone the terrifying emptiness of that conviction had started him out of his uneasy sleep. Leaving him cold and shaken.

For one moment he indulged himself in a fantasy of Buffy and him together, sharing the night for countless years to come. Just the thought of no longer being the only vampire with a soul, a lonely freak of nature that didn't fit in anywhere, to have someone to share his unique existence and for that someone to be Buffy...

With a sigh he recalled himself to reality. Buffy wasn't cursed yet, might never be. And once she was, even if she was able to forgive him for the new hell he had turned her life into, it still wouldn't change anything. They still couldn't risk being together. Not if doing so might unleash not just one, but two vicious monsters on the unsuspecting world.

For now the important thing was to find her and prevent her from doing things she would regret once her soul was restored, to stop the monster she had become - through his fault.

* * 9 * *

With a frustrated sigh Buffy ducked behind another ventilation shaft. Just her luck. The first chance she had to slip Methos' and Duncan's careful guard and go looking for Angel, and she had to run into a sword happy Immortal gone head hunting.

She didn't know if it was Haller, the treacherous Immortal that Duncan's Watcher Joe Dawson had warned them against. But even if it wasn't, she doubted that he would let her go, just because she had been too stupid to take one of the swords at the dojo along for insurance.

For the last two hours she had tried to lose her pursuer. No matter how many times she thought she had managed to shake him, he always caught up with her. She was getting very tired of the buzz that announced that he had found her yet again.

He had been on the bus she had taken towards downtown LA. She had jumped through the doors just before they closed, not noticing the

warning buzz until it was too late. Hoping that the presence of the other people on the bus would be enough to assure her safety, she had looked around trying to pinpoint its source.

She needn't have bothered. A stocky blond guy in his middle twenties walked right up to her, grabbing her in a quick hug while he whispered in her ear: "Your Quickening is mine, little girl. No matter where you run, I'll find you. And then I'll kill you!" With that he had stepped back, his lips pulled back into a derisive smile.

She had stood there feeling stupid and exposed, not sure how to react.

Waiting for a crowded stop before getting off, she had dodged around people in an effort to lose him. Throwing a look back she saw that he wasn't even paying her any attention. Instead he seemed engrossed in what looked like a pager to her. Maybe the guy was simply nuts.

Putting him from her mind, she had instead concentrated on finding a vampire that might be able to give her some clue to Angel's whereabouts. After staking three of them without gaining any information, she had finally run into a scruffy looking teenager that claimed to have seen someone fitting Angel's description down on the docks. Since he also offered to accompany her there, saying that it really wasn't a good area for a girl to go all alone, she wasn't sure if he had really seen Angel, or was just trying to pick up a date. But having no better lead, she decided to go have a look, though she refused to take the boy along.

Now she wondered if the boy might have been sent by the Immortal from the bus, because as soon as she reached the seedier parts of town she had felt the by now familiar buzz that heralded the presence of another Immortal. Looking around she had caught a glimpse of the blond guy from the bus, and decided to follow Methos' time honored practice and run in no mood for a one sided fight.

She had easily lost him, but he kept finding her, and she had no idea how. Maybe he was able to sense and pinpoint Immortals over a greater distance than she. Maybe he knew some other trick she hadn't gotten around to learning. Whatever the reason, she decided that it was time to admit defeat and make her way back to Methos apartment. Finding Angel would just have to wait for another night.

She spotted the top of a ladder sticking up above the edge of the roof and quickly worked her way over to it, trying to keep her profile as low as possible. Pulling her sleeves over her hands she grabbed a hold of the guide rails, then took her feet off the rungs and slid down the ladder fireman-style. Jumping down from the end of the ladder she landed lightly in the ally below, then grinned up at the head sticking out over the edge of the building. 'Let's see him copy that!' She thought triumphantly.

Sure that she had gained a little breathing space she sauntered out to the main road, only to spot a familiar figure getting out of a dark green Range Rover.

"Joe! What are you doing here?" She called out to him as she crossed the street and entered the small parking lot next to one of the other

buildings.

"Looking for you actually." Joe answered her with a sigh. "Methos was worried that you and MacLeod might have run afoul of Haller."

"I don't know if it's Haller, but there certainly is some nutcase with a sword after me. I was just on my way back to Methos' apartment. I'd be grateful if you could give me a ride. I've done enough walking for one day." Then as an afterthought she asked him: "How did you know where to look for me anyway?"

"Haller's Watcher checked in. Said that his Immortal was playing cat and mouse with a little blond girl down by the docks. Also said that there was a third guy following them around in the shadows." Joe told her with a grin. "I am guessing that's MacLeod keeping an eye on you?"

She felt a thrill run along her nerves. "That other guy wasn't by any chance tall, dark, handsome, and very good at lurking?" She asked him trying not to get her hopes up.

Joe gave her a sharp look. "He said that it was a tall guy, but he didn't get a good look at him. Said the guy had an almost uncanny ability to blend into the background."

Buffy felt a big grin spread across her face. That sounded like Angel alright. But if it was, why hadn't he tried to let her know he was there? A frown slowly replaced her grin as she tried to recall what exactly Xander had said about Angel.

"I take it you know this guy?" Joe interrupted her musings.

"Maybe. It sounds a lot like a friend of mine." Buffy admitted.

"But then, where is MacLeod?" Joe wanted to know.

"He's safe."

Buffy spun around as a willowy figure in a long, flowing, deep amber dress stepped out of the shadows. "There is nothing for you to worry about." Against her will Buffy found herself drawn deep into the stranger's sea-green eyes. "Relax. You're safe. Nothing here concerns you." Her voice seemed to echo strangely in her brain. Somewhere deep inside her a warning bell went off, and Buffy tried her best to resist the stranger's suggestions.

"MacLeod is all right." The Stranger continued. "I will take you to him and you will come with me. There is no reason to fight me." Buffy felt the stranger's power slip past her guard and wrap itself around her mind, damping down her resistance.

From somewhere far away she heard Joe Dawson ask: "Cassandra? What are you doing here? Where is MacLeod?"

Buffy felt the compulsion lessen as Cassandra focused her power on Joe instead, and immediately renewed her efforts to throw off the other's compulsion. Why was she doing this? MacLeod had called her a friend, but trying to take over someone else's mind didn't strike her as particularly friendly.

"Go and find Methos." Cassandra was telling Joe.

Buffy regained enough control that she was able to look over at MacLeod's Watcher. He looked dazed. His features slack, his eyes unfocused. "Find Methos." he repeated slowly.

"Tell him to meet me..." Cassandra broke off and Buffy saw her grimace before she took a deep breath and continued. "Tell him to meet me in Sunset Cemetery or he will never see his two friends here again."

That last sounded like a clear threat to Buffy, and gave her enough impetus to shrug off the last shreds of Cassandra's power. Her mind working feverishly she forced herself to show no outward sign that her mind was once again her own.

Cassandra threw her a suspicious glance and Buffy quickly let her features go slack, imitating the expression she had seen on Joe's face. She figured that as long as Cassandra thought she was still under her power she would leave her alone. So Buffy would follow her orders, until she found out more about MacLeod and what this friend of his had planned for all of them.

* * * * *

Keeping to the shadows Angel made his way to the corner of the building around which he had seen Buffy disappear. He could feel the soft tingle that always marked Buffy's presence. Taking a deep breath he reminded himself one more time, that this wasn't Buffy anymore, but a vicious demon wearing her body. It was hard not to forget when she still looked and even felt so much like she had before she had been changed.

No wonder it had taken Buffy so long to work up the resolve to try and kill him after he had lost his soul last year. If even he, who knew better than anyone else the difference between the vampire and the person it had been, had this much trouble keeping the two separated when he looked at Buffy, how much harder must it have been for her?

As he neared the corner a low buzz joined the tingle. Angel threw a quick look around and saw the ickleck that had been trailing Buffy coming out of the alley across the street. He was looking down at some kind of handheld monitor and hadn't yet noticed Angel.

Time to find a place to hide. He spotted some pipes running along the building just above his head. Good enough. In his experience few people ever bothered to look up.

Standing on top of the pipe he inched his way over to the corner and felt the low buzz increase. His gaze swept over the small parking lot. There was Buffy. Next to her stood an older man with a short gray beard and hair, who was leaning heavily on a bamboo walking cane. Across from them stood the source of the additional buzz. She appeared to be a beautiful woman in her late twenties with long black hair, but Angel instantly knew her for what she was: another ickleck.

He wondered what Buffy could have done to attract the attention of not one but two of these immortal demons. They usually didn't concern

themselves with vampires, too busy fighting their own private wars.

He still remembered the time Darla had taken him to watch one of their fights and the attendant light show when one of them finally managed to cut off the other's head. Both Darla and even the Master had been very insistent that these beings were to be avoided whenever possible. If Buffy really had found a teacher as old as Xander had claimed, he should have told her about them, and that it was best to walk the other way when you felt the buzz that warned you of their presence

He could hear the ickleck ordering the older man to find someone called Methos and tell him to meet her in Sunset Cemetery if he ever wanted to see his friends again. He barely suppressed a frustrated growl as he watched Buffy leave with the female ickleck, unable to follow without attracting the attention of the other ickleck crouching below him. He saw the older man get into the Range Rover and slowly pull out of the parking lot. As the car passed beneath him, he threw one last glance in the direction Buffy had vanished then dropped to land lightly on top of the car's roof.

* * *

Angel paced the hallway in front of the apartment he had followed the older man to, trying to decide what he should do next.

The low buzz he could feel told him quite clearly that there was yet another ickleck involved.

What did all these icklecks want with Buffy?

Whatever it was, he doubted that it was something good. Which meant he was about to find out first hand just how many of the horror tales vampires told about icklecks were true.

Taking a deep breath Angel knocked on the door of the apartment then stepped to one side of it. He could hear footsteps on the other side of the door. They were quick and even and there were no sounds that suggested the use of a cane. Not the old man then. Good.

The door opened and Angel tensed, ready to spring. The person answering the door was careful, but not careful enough. As he leaned out just enough to glance down the corridor Angel's hand shot out and grabbed him by the throat. With a quick jerk he pulled him through the door and slammed him up against the wall.

Angel quickly switched hands, the man's struggles ineffective against his vampire strength, so that he now had his right hand free to deal with whatever threat would come next through the door.

He heard the metallic snick of the safety being taken off a gun and felt his lips pull back into a feral grin. Bullets might hurt like hell, but were otherwise not very effective against vampires.

He pressed himself up against the wall, ignoring the muffled protests of the man he still held tightly enough to allow him little more air than he needed to stay alive. From the sounds nearing the door, he guessed that it was the old man holding the pistol. He couldn't help but wonder what the ickleck was waiting for.

He heard the cane drop to the floor as the old man threw himself through the doorway, shooting at Angel with no concern that he might hit the other man. Well, if he didn't care, Angel decided that he wouldn't either. Snarling at the pain of a bullet burying itself in his chest he threw himself on top of the old man without letting go of the other's neck, and quickly wrestled the gun from his grip.

Since the pistol had had a silencer on it he didn't expect any other humans to come running, but the ickleck should have made an appearance by now. Trying to ignore the ineffective struggles of the two humans he focused on following the low buzz to its source and found himself staring in disbelief at the younger man still held fast in his grip.

"You?" He asked surprised. "Is this some kind of joke?" This was the ickleck?

"If it is, I don't think it the least bit funny." The ickleck choked out painfully.

Despite himself Angel felt one corner of his mouth quirk up in appreciation of the other's gallows' humor. Shaking his head he released his grip on the ickleck's throat and helped the older man back to his feet then went to retrieve the walking cane from where it lay across the apartment's threshold. He handed the cane to its owner but kept the pistol casually ready in his right hand as a reminder that he was the one in charge here.

For a few moments they just stood there staring at each other none of them sure where to start.

Still massaging its throat, the ickleck was the first to speak. "Is this how you introduce yourself to strangers all the time?"

Angel shrugged "Only when I'm dealing with a dangerous demon."

"Yeah, well, there are no demons here, dangerous or otherwise." The ickleck grumbled.

Angel raised his eyebrows in disbelief. "Are you trying to pretend that you are human?"

The other raised his head warily. "What do * you* know about me? Do I look like a demon?"

Angel took a moment to consider his answer. "Well either the tales told about your kind are totally without foundation, or you must be the runt of the litter." He answered deliberately trying to bait it.

It didn't have the expected effect. The ickleck's mouth dropped open while the older man couldn't suppress a snort of laughter.

"Almost strangling me wasn't enough now you have to insult me too? Why are you here?" It demanded shooting an irritated look at the older man.

"I am trying to find out why you icklecks are so interested in Buffy." Angel told it grimly.

"Buffy? Are you that friend of hers from the docks?" the older guy asked at the same time as the ickleck demanded: "Ickleck? You're a vampire aren't you?"

"Yes." Angel answered both of them.

They both stared at him in disbelief for a moment then the old man demanded: "You're a vampire?" while the ickleck asked: "You're a friend of Buffy's?"

Angel felt the corners of his mouth twitch as he once again answered with a simple "Yes."

"Which?" the old man asked.

"Both."

"Butâ€¦ how is that possible?" the ickleck asked.

"Long story." Angel told them. "One we don't have time for right now. I assume that you are Methos?"

"Yes, and if you're a friend of Buffy's you should know that the stories you are likely to have heard about my kind were deliberately created for the sole purpose of getting your kind to leave us alone." Methos told him.

"Are you saying that they're not true?"

Methos refused to meet his eyes as he shook his head. "I didn't say that."

"Then what are you saying?" Angel demanded impatiently.

"That with a few notable exceptions, we are exactly the same as regular humans. We just don't age and we don't stay dead." Methos told him.

"Unless someone cuts off your head." Angel added.

"Well, yes." Methos admitted reluctantly.

"You seriously expect me to believe that you are a vampire?" The older man broke in.

Angel simply pulled open his coat and showed him the bullet hole in the middle of his chest. "For future reference, bullets don't do much good against vampires. Crosses or Holy Water, fire, direct sunlight will burn them and a wooden stake in the heart will turn them to dust." Then he smiled at Methos. "Or you can cut off their heads."

"Be careful, Joe, your jaw might just hit the floor." Methos told the older man with an amused smile. "I told you and MacLeod that vampires were real." Then he led the way into his apartment. "Well, since we aren't going to kill each other after all, why don't we continue this discussion in comfort?"

When Angel didn't follow them in, they turned to him with a questioning look on their faces.

"A vampire also can't enter someone's home unless he is invited in." Angel told them with a shrug.

Methos looked at him askance. "If I invite you in does that mean that any vampire can just walk in at any time?"

Angel shook his head. "No, just me, but the invitation will remain in force unless revoked with a specific spell."

"A Spell? First vampires and now magic." Joe muttered under his breath, while Methos hesitated a moment then shrugged. "Well, why don't you come in? You never did tell us your name."

"Angel." He told them as he stepped over the threshold.

"Well, - Angel - the reason we icklecks are so interested in Buffy is because she is one of us." Methos told him dryly and Angel froze feeling as stunned as if he had run full force into a solid wall.

"She is what?!" He finally managed to choke out. "But are you sure?"

Methos looked at him with an ironic smile. "Let me guess: you thought she had been turned into a vampire?"

Angel barely managed to nod in reply. "How?"

"If it's any consolation, Buffy was just as surprised as you that she was simply an Immortal instead of a vampire," Methos told him, "and that she had been one for the last two years. See, Immortals grow and age the same as regular humans until the moment of their first death. From then on they remain frozen in time."

"Two years?" Angel repeated still struggling to absorb this new turn of events. "You mean when she was killed by the Master? But it was Xander that brought her back with CPR after she drowned."

Methos shook his head. "She would have revived on her own once she got out of the water."

Angel's head was spinning and he barely made it over to the sofa before his knees gave out. Buffy was not only alive and not a vampire she was immortal! She wouldn't grow old or die unless some other ickleck cut off her head in one of their pointless duels.

That last thought recalled to him the danger Buffy was in right now.

"So that was why that blond guy was tracing Buffy all over town. How do we stop him and that other woman?"

"I don't think that Cassandra is after Buffy's head. She is just trying to use her and MacLeod to get to me." At Angel's questioning look Methos added. "There is some old pain between us. She would have taken my head a couple months ago in Bordeaux if Duncan hadn't asked

her to spare me. Though the fact that she wants to meet on Holy Ground shows that she is at least willing to talk to me before she tries again."

"Holy Ground? I thought she wanted to meet you in a cemetery?" Angel asked slightly confused.

Methos nodded. "Cemeteries, churches, any holy places, not just Christian ones, are neutral ground where we Immortals can not take each other's heads."

"Cassandra may honor those rules." Joe broke in. "But we have to assume that Haller will try to find some way around that restriction if he can. We better hope that he doesn't show up there."

Angel shook his head slowly. "I think there is very little chance that he won't. He heard Cassandra make the rendezvous, plus he was keeping track of Buffy using some kind of electronic tracing device. We better be ready for him and whatever you think he might try."

* * 10 * *

Duncan MacLeod stubbornly kept straining against the ropes holding him to the chair despite the burning pain from his lacerated wrists. He regretted having toppled his chair over in an effort to break it. The only result had been an increase in the pounding headache left behind from whatever Cassandra had put in his tea and it had left him in a most uncomfortable position laying on his side.

He didn't know how long he had been unconscious, but he refused to believe that he might be too late to prevent the death of one of his friends at the hands of the other. He had no doubt that Cassandra meant to kill Methos this time, especially since she seemed to be under the mistaken impression that it had been Methos that had taken Marcus Aurelius' head. Being so much older than her should give Methos an edge, and he thought that Methos would refrain from actually taking Cassandra's head should he win, but you could never be sure how such a fight would turn out.

It wasn't always the stronger or older Immortal that won, as MacLeod knew all too well from his own experience. Plus if Methos should find himself in a situation where it came down to his head or Cassandra's, he had no doubt which one he would choose. Methos was the ultimate survivor.

His head snapped up as he felt the presence of another Immortal and he redoubled his efforts to get free, ignoring the pain as the ropes cut into his skin slicking the ropes with his blood.

He felt a glimmer of hope as the door opened and Buffy stepped into the room, only to have it dashed as he saw the slack expression on her face and saw Cassandra close the door behind them.

"Where is Methos?" he asked, dreading the answer.

"I will meet with him later." Cassandra took in his position on the floor and his bloody wrist with a frown. She stepped over to him and carefully set his chair back upright. "I really don't understand why you care what happens to him. You saw what Chronos was like. What makes you so sure that Methos is any different? He was the one that

helped Chronos reassemble the Horsemen, that was willing to help him return the world to the level of the dark ages."

MacLeod shook his head stubbornly. "Methos is too much of a scholar to want to see the world descend into ignorance. It was his help that allowed us to defeat Chronos before he had a chance to release his engineered virus into the water supply, unleashing a new plague on mankind."

"Methos is nothing but a coward!" Cassandra protested. "He knew that you would defeat Chronos and decided to throw his lot in with the winner. He would do anything to keep his miserable head just one more day! Nothing else ever matters to him. He has no concept of friendship or loyalty!"

"How would you know what he is like? Even if he truly was the kind of monster you make him out to be, that was 3000 years ago!" Duncan forced himself to take a calming breath. "You told me that you knew that I had to pass through darkness to become the champion for the light. Do you know what that darkness was?"

Cassandra just looked at him.

"Have you ever heard of a Dark Quickening?" He saw her eyes widen in shock.

"She may know what that is, but I sure don't." Duncan's head whipped around in surprise. He had forgotten all about Buffy in his attempt to get through to Cassandra. Cassandra herself looked just as surprised as Buffy stepped out from behind her, a kitchen knife held ready in one hand. Daring Cassandra to stop her, she stepped behind Duncan and cut the ropes holding him.

Easing his cramped shoulders he explained to Buffy. "A Dark Quickening is when the evil of the Immortal whose head you take is too much for you to handle. It takes you over, overwhelms you, distorts your personality and everything you feel." He wondered how he could explain what it had been like. "It's like..."

"...like you had lost your soul." Buffy finished the sentence for him, her eyes widening with horror.

"Yes." Duncan nodded. "That's a good way to describe it. And I would have stayed like that if it hadn't been for Methos. He risked his own head trying to show me the way back to myself."

At Cassandra's disbelieving look he asked angrily: "You don't think I would have taken his head? I tried to. The only thing that saved him was that we were on Holy Ground at the time. I killed Shawn Burns, one of my best friends. Didn't even give him a chance to defend himself, just cut off his head while he was trying to extend a helping hand." Self-loathing surged up in him as he remembered all he done during that time. "And I felt nothing! No regret, no triumph, taking his head meant nothing to me!" He swallowed hard, unable to look at either of them. "And Methos saw me do it, too late to stop me, and he still wouldn't give up on me! I owe him everything!"

With a deep breath he pushed the dark memories away and forced himself to look Cassandra straight in the eye. "Now do you understand?"

Cassandra began to pace the floor with quick agitated steps. "But what he did to me... I have to make him pay for it, or I'll never have any peace. It won't leave me alone!"

Duncan looked at her helplessly, wondering how something that had happened 3000 years ago could still hold so much power over her.

It was Buffy that broke the silence. "Yeah, well, revenge is never as satisfying as you think it is going to be. If you really want to be free of those old memories, the best way is to replace them with new ones. Why don't you try to get to know him..."

Cassandra broke in impatiently: "What would you know about it? Have you ever had a man you trusted and thought you loved turn on you? Betray you in every way possible? You have no idea what that feels like!"

"Oh, I don't?" Buffy countered her face full of remembered pain. "I have only had the person I loved most in the whole world turn into a soulless monster because of what I did. Had him stalk me and my friends trying to kill us, all because some revenge crazed gypsies would rather have him become a monster again then let him have even one moment of true happiness!"

Buffy turned away from them wrapping her arms around herself. "So tell me again that I don't know what I'm talking about. It took me weeks before I was able to replace the good memories with new ones so that I would be able to kill him, only to have him get his soul back at the last moment." A shiver ran through Buffy's frame, but when she looked back at them after another few moments most of the pain was gone from her eyes. "Believe me, it is much easier to replace bad memories with good ones then the other way around, especially if you still love him."

Cassandra looked at Buffy speechless for a moment then protested indignantly. "I don't love Methos! I never really did!"

Buffy just shrugged, her eyes never leaving Cassandra's and in the end it was Cassandra that looked away first.

"All right!" Cassandra almost growled. "I'll talk to him! And I'll try not to kill him unless he tries to kill me first."

"In that case you better not ask him for any lessons in sword-fighting." Buffy advised her with a smile.

* * 11 * *

Joe Dawson guided the Range Rover past the entrance of Sunset Cemetery and began a slow circuit of the streets surrounding it. "Anything?" he asked the 5000 year old Immortal sitting beside him.

Methos shook his head. "The others aren't here yet, and neither is Haller as far as I can tell."

"There may not be any other Immortals around, but I spotted two humans hiding behind some of the gravestones. And at least one of them had some kind of gun."

At Angel's words Joe looked up into the rearview mirror and barely suppressed a shudder at the empty back window he saw reflected in it. As a vampire Angel didn't have a reflection. It was probably this simple fact more than anything else that had finally made him believe that Angel wasn't the young handsome man he looked like, but a truly alien creature.

And if vampires were real, who was to say what other creatures might be out there in the dark? Not the most comforting thought when you were about to keep a rendezvous in a graveyard in the wee hours of the morning.

Methos turned around in his seat to look at Angel. "You think they are working for Haller?"

"I don't know, but what other reason would a human have to be at the cemetery at this time of the night carrying a gun?" Angel asked in return.

"In this town?" Methos raised his eyebrows in surprise that Angel would even ask. "They might be Haller's but we can't be sure of that."

"Either way, I think I better make sure that they can't interfere." Angel stated quietly.

"Uh, you aren't going to..." Joe broke off uncomfortably. "I mean..., don't take this the wrong way, but you being a vampire..." Joe threw a worried look back over his shoulder, wishing he had kept his mouth shut in the first place. Anything he said now would only make it worse.

Angel looked back at him with sardonic amusement. "Don't worry, I get my meals from the butcher or the blood bank. No more human fast food for me, it doesn't agree with my soul." Joe turned his attention back to the street, trying to pretend that that hadn't been what he had been thinking of as Angel continued in an even voice: "No, I was thinking more along the lines of inviting them to spend some quality time in one of the family crypts around here - after relieving them of their weapons of course. Quiet contemplation in such stimulating surroundings can have a very salutary effect on a person."

* * * * *

Angel was sneaking up on the second man after having left the first one on the floor of the Miller crypt, unconscious, when he felt the soft tingle that let him know Buffy was around. The low buzz that joined it soon after told him that she wasn't alone.

The second man was soon dealt with as well and he was just leaving the crypt when the silence was shattered by muffled gunfire.

Vaulting several gravestones that were in his way Angel ran towards the source of the sound.

The smell of freshly shed blood assaulted his senses as he rounded the corner of the funeral parlor. With one quick look he took in the scene in front of him.

To his right Joe Dawson was laying on the ground, his body shielded by Methos, Buffy and a third man whose long black hair was pulled back into a ponytail. All of them were bleeding from several gunshot wounds, and he thought that the dark haired guy might be dead. The longhaired Immortal woman from the docks certainly was, judging from the unnatural position she was sprawled in a few feet away from the others.

To his left was the blond ickleck from the docks the semiautomatic in his hands still pointed at his victims.

Barely holding back an enraged growl Angel charged him as silently as possible.

Just before he reached him, Haller spun towards him and managed to squeeze off a couple of rounds. One of the bullets grazed the side of his head, another slammed into his left shoulder, but neither was enough to stop Angel from kicking the gun out of his hands.

Taking a deep breath Angel forced himself to back off the now defenseless Immortal. With the blood smell still hanging thick in the air he was afraid that he might be unable to keep his demonic side under control if he laid hands on this guy right now.

"Who the hell are you?" Haller demanded.

Thinking of the things that he wanted to do to this man right now Angel answered him with a grim smile: "I am your worst nightmare."

"Oh, yeah?" Haller gave a contemptuous snort. "Well, I don't have nightmares!"

"You do now." Angel reassured him, relaxing the tight rein he kept on himself enough to let the demon show through.

"Angel?" He looked over and saw that Buffy was trying to regain her feet with Methos' help.

"Are you all right?" he asked worriedly, seeing the numerous bloodstains covering her shirt.

"I'll live. My shirt on the other... Angel!" He saw her eyes widen in fear as she screamed out the warning.

He gasped as a searing pain tore through his chest. Haller had taken advantage of his distraction to pull out the sword hidden under his long coat, and rammed it straight through his heart.

The sight of the sword protruding from his chest triggered a whole avalanche of unpleasant memories for Angel. Fear and rage washed through him as he was assaulted with images of his tenure in hell and his face shifted into its vampire visage.

Haller's mouth dropped open at the sight of the now blazing yellow eyes staring back at him. "What trick is this? What are you?" He asked as he stumbled back. Angel hissed at the pain of the sword being clumsily withdrawn from his body.

"What I am is really ticked!" Angel growled at him. "I really don't like people sticking swords into me." With that he lashed out with a hard right to the Immortal's face. Haller instinctively brought up his sword in a parry, slicing into Angel's arm. Growling with frustration Angel barely stopped himself from going after the other teeth first. 'Lose your head now, Angel,' he told himself, 'and you really lose your head. You can't protect Buffy if you're dust!'

"Angel!" Methos' voice rang out, and he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. His growl shifted into something almost like a satisfied purr as he snatched the sword Methos threw him from the air. This was more like it!

But as he launched his attack on the Immortal he realized with a sinking feeling that he might well be overmatched. With his worries over Buffy he hadn't been eating enough to fully recover from his torture at Marco's hands and the wounds he had taken tonight weren't helping either. In a last ditch effort to hold the creeping weakness at bay he began to consciously draw on the strength of his demonic side. But that also brought back the memories of the last time he had faced someone with a sword.

Images of him and Buffy fighting in front of the statue of Acatla flashed before his eyes and with it came the associated feelings of hate and rage. Suddenly Haller became a stand-in for everything Angel had ever hated, with or without his soul. He became Darla, Buffy and himself all rolled up into one neat package as a red haze seemed to envelop him.

One small part of him kept insisting that this was too dangerous, that he needed to regain control or he might just go insane. But the greater part of him wasn't listening, reveling instead in the unbridled violence as he vented two centuries worth of accumulated frustrations on the enemy before him.

And even with all that it was a close thing. He thought he heard voices yelling, one of them Buffy's, but he couldn't spare any attention from his own defense.

In the end it was more luck than anything else that allowed him to disarm Haller. The Immortal stepped on his discarded gun, throwing his balance off just long enough for Angel to knock his sword out of his hands. A part of him wanted to sit back and gloat, to rub his enemy's nose in his defeat, but this time his rational side won and he followed through with a swing that cleanly separated the other's head from his shoulders.

Panting and dizzy Angel grounded his sword and leaned on it like a crutch to keep himself upright.

He heard someone running towards him and with a snarl he brought up his sword in a defensive position to face this new threat. Her eyes huge in her pale face Buffy skidded to a stop a few feet away from him. "Angel, it's me!" she told him in a choked voice.

Before he could answer her, a low crackling sound drew his attention back to the corpse lying at his feet. An ominous, glowing mist was slowly rising all around it. As he stared in disbelief a series of half-seen ghost images began to form in the mist. There were men and

women, all of them carrying swords that crackled with bright blue lightning. As he watched they whirled into the air in a furious dance, fighting each other as well as striking out at anything within their reach. He watched a gravestone shatter as one of the ghosts struck it with it's sword and winced as some of its splinters buried themselves in his side. Then he saw them heading towards Buffy and forgot all about his pain and the strangeness of what he was witnessing.

With an inarticulate cry he threw himself in front of Buffy just as the first one of them was coming at her in a flash of bright lightning. He felt heat searing along his nerves as he intercepted the lightning strike with his own body, then everything went black.

* * *

The first thing that penetrated the darkness he floated in was the sound of Buffy's voice calling his name from far away. He instinctively responded to the tone of desperation in her voice and strained to rush to her rescue.

Then her voice was joined by others.

"Can he be moved?" Methos' voice. "We need to get out of here before someone shows up to investigate the disturbance."

"The guy is dead, Methos. I don't think moving him can do anymore damage to him." answered an unfamiliar voice.

"He's not dead!" Buffy protested. "I won't let him die!"

"He doesn't have a pulse, Buffy." The strange voice pointed out reasonably. "And he isn't Immortal. I'm sorry Buffy..."

"You don't understand! Of course he doesn't have a pulse. He's a vampire!" Buffy told him impatiently. "We need to get him out of here before the sun comes up."

"He's a vampire and you want us to help him?" Demanded an outraged female voice. "Vampires are evil demons that need to be killed whenever you get the chance!"

"Not this one." Buffy countered, then threatened: "You harm him and I'll borrow Methos' sword and give you a chin-length hair cut the fast way!"

"Cassandra, he just saved all our lives. The least we can do is get him somewhere safe..." Cassandra interrupted Methos with a contemptuous laugh. "I should have known. He preserved your precious head, of course you would stand up for him! Never mind that he is a vicious demon..."

With an angry growl Buffy demanded: "Methos, give me your sword. I think I am taking up the barbering business right now!"

"Calm down, Buffy..." The strange male voice was interrupted by a snarl from Cassandra: "Bring it on, little girl, and we'll see who will get a new hair cut!"

Angel heard the metallic hiss of a sword being drawn. The thought of Buffy being attacked jolted him out of his detached numbness. An involuntary groan escaped his lips as his body protested against his efforts to sit up.

He felt two small hands gently pushing him back down. "Thank God, you had me worried!"

Angel slowly forced his eyes to focus on Buffy's worried face. "You're all right!" He breathed relieved. "Those blue ghosts didn't get you with their swords."

"What ghosts?" Buffy asked him confused.

"The ghosts in the blue mist. They got loose when that ickleck died. I got some splinters in my side from when one of them chopped up that gravestone to prove they were real." Exhausted from the effort of stringing that many words together his eyes drifted shut again.

"Methos?" Buffy turned to the oldest one there for clarification.

"He must be talking about the Quickenings." Methos answered. "Maybe he somehow saw images of the Immortals whose heads Haller has taken before this. Though I've never heard of anything like that before."

"We really need to get out of here. We're lucky we've been left alone so far." The pony-tailed stranger reminded everybody. "We need to take Joe to the hospital to have that bullet hole in his arm taken care of."

"I'm all right, MacLeod. But what about Angel? He got shot up, run through with a sword and finally fried by lightning, are you sure it's safe to move him?"

"I know something that should help. I need something sharp." Angel cracked open one eye for a moment to see Buffy worrying at her bottom lip with her teeth. MacLeod offered her his sword and she drew it lightly across her left wrist. Glistening drops of blood began to bead up along the length of the cut and Angel felt his nostrils flare as the smell of her blood reached him. He watched with an almost hypnotized fascination as she offered her cut wrist to him.

"Here, that should help you heal enough so we can get you out of here safely." She told him her face set with determination.

He found himself unable to look away from the blood slowly welling up from the cut. Every fiber of his body screamed with the desire to give in, to take her up on her offer. Swallowing hard he forced his eyes closed and fought back his bloodlust and the ingrained survival instinct that demanded that he drink "now!"

"No!" he grated out. He would not bite Buffy again, no matter what.

"Angel, if you don't you might die!" Buffy almost yelled at him.

"Then I die." Angel told her in a flat voice, keeping his eyes tightly shut.

"Don't you dare!" Buffy threatened. "You die, and I will stake you myself! Now drink!"

"No." he repeated stubbornly.

"I don't believe this." Cassandra exclaimed in disbelief. "A vampire that doesn't drink blood?"

"He still has to drink blood, he just â€" Oh! Hand me that flower vase there? - No, without the flowers! - Thanks Methos." Angel wondered what she was up to now, but refused to open his eyes and look. No matter what she might try, he would not bite her again!

The smell of blood became stronger. "Here, let me." He heard Methos say. "I don't mind donating some for a good cause."

"Okay, help me prop him up." He felt a pair of hands reach around his back and gritted his teeth against the pain as he was levered into a sitting position. "This way you don't have to bite anyone. Now, drink!" Buffy ordered him.

Angel opened his eyes to stare at a flower vase filled with a mixture of Buffy's and Methos' blood, but made no move to drink from it.

"You are as stubborn as that bloody Scot!" Methos complained from where he was propping Angel up. "What is the difference between this and getting it from a blood bank?"

"I am Irish, not Scottish." he corrected Methos to give himself a bit more time.

"Irish, Scottish, what's the difference? You're both stupid stubborn Celts!" Methos dismissed his distinction. "It's done. No use crying over spilt blood. Or do you want us to just pour it on the ground?"

"Please Angel, just drink it?" Buffy begged him quietly.

He felt his resistance crumble before the pleading expression of her eyes. With a sigh he yielded to Buffy's persuasion and was rewarded with a brilliant smile that made him forget all about his body's various hurts.

* * 12 * *

Buffy looked down at Angel's still form stretched out on her bed in Methos' apartment. One of her hands reached out to hover over the burns that covered the right side of his face, wishing that there was something more she could do for him. She was tempted to run her hands through his tousled hair, but was afraid that he would wake if she did. According to Cassandra he needed sleep now more than anything else. So she just stood there watching him sleep.

They had done what they could for his wounds earlier, Cassandra watching their efforts in that direction with growing impatience. She had finally chased them off, telling them to leave healing to a

Healer and taken over Angel's treatment with a deft touch.

"You really love him." Cassandra's voice came from behind her, somewhere between a question and a statement.

"I do." Buffy answered her simply.

"He's a vampire." Cassandra voiced her disapproval.

"He's Angel." Buffy shrugged. "How are you and Methos getting along?"

Cassandra let out an explosive breath. "He is the most impossible person I have met in all of my life!"

Buffy folded her arms in front of her and grinned up into a pair of green eyes that were fairly spitting sparks. "I guess you're starting to like him."

"Like him? He makes me so mad I want to shake him!" Cassandra snorted.

"At least you don't want to chop off his head anymore." Buffy pointed out. "And somehow I doubt that your dreams will be haunted by what he did to you back then again."

"How did you know I was having nightmares?" Cassandra asked taken a back.

"Been there." Buffy told her quietly.

There was a moment's silence then Cassandra asked her: "So, what will you do now?"

"Don't know. Maybe I'll stay here with Methos for a while." Buffy looked down at Angel again. Would he be happy to have her here in LA, or would he just leave for a different city? "Methos says I have to quit being the Slayer, and I can't go back to Sunnydale anyway if everyone there thinks I am dead."

"Why would you have to quit hunting vampires?" Cassandra asked her with a frown.

"Methos says that vampires can sense Immortals. They call them icky-somethings. I guess a long time ago some Immortals played at being cruel and nasty to out gross the vampires, so they wouldn't get turned into a handy blood bank." Buffy looked up at Cassandra with an ironic smile. "Can't have me going around ruining all their hard work."

"He's wrong." Buffy looked around to see that Angel was awake.

"What do you mean?" Buffy asked him.

"No vampire would take you for an ick... an Immortal."

"Why?"

"You don't feel like one. You don't really feel like other Slayers either. I always thought it was just because you were you." Angel

told her with a slight shrug. "And you can go back to Sunnydale anytime you want. Your mother told everyone that you had to go to LA for a family emergency. The only people who think you're dead are your father and the hospital, and Willow might be able to help you there. So that just leaves your father."

Buffy was torn between the relief that she wouldn't have to start a totally new life from scratch and the idea of staying here with Angel. He must have read some of this on her face because he took one of her hands into his and told her quietly. "Even if you stayed here in LA, things still couldn't be any different between us. All the things I said to you before the prom are still true."

"But they're not!" Buffy protested. "Immortals can't have kids and a family anymore than vampires. And - and moonlight picnics are a lot like Sunday picnics, only with vampires instead of ants!"

She felt Angel's grip tighten on her hand and saw a flash of raw longing and pain in his eyes before he looked away. "But there is still the curse. I still can't make you happy. Nothing's really changed."

"But it has! We have time now." She looked down at Angel's expressionless face. "Don't you see? Methos has been around for 5000 years! Don't you think that's enough time to solve the problem with your curse?" She saw him freeze, no longer even breathing, the only sign of life the slight tremor shaking the hand that held hers.

"What's this curse you're talking about?" Cassandra wanted to know.

"Roughly a hundred years ago he ticked off a bunch of gypsies, and being fresh out of boils and blinding torment, they instead decided to restore his soul." Buffy explained to her. "Unfortunately they forgot to tell him that if he was ever truly happy he would lose it again. We found that out the hard way." She felt Angel trying to withdraw his hand, but refused to let it go.

"But doesn't he have his soul now?" Cassandra asked with a frown.

"A friend of ours found the original curse and Willow managed to make it stick." Buffy told her shortly, not wanting to go into the sordid details.

"I have been a witch for almost 3000 years, and I have never heard of such a spell. You said gypsies did this?" Gripping Angel's hand tightly Buffy nodded. "I would like to have a word with this Willow of yours, and there are a couple of books at my house in Ireland that deal with gypsy magic. Methos might know something that might help as well. He is a terrible lout, but he does have some interesting books on his shelves."

Buffy was no longer sure if it was Angel's hand or her own that was shaking.

Cassandra saw the expression on their faces and held up a cautionary hand. "I didn't say that I would be able to help. I don't know anything about this curse of yours."

Buffy swallowed hard. "I understand that. But - but at least there is some hope?"

"There is always hope." Cassandra shrugged. "Just don't count on it." Then she looked down at Angel. "And you need to get some sleep so your body can heal. Come along, Buffy, lets see what the men are doing."

They entered the living room just as Joe hung up the phone. "You won't believe this. You know those men Angel knocked out in the graveyard? One of them was Haller's Watcher. He just called me on his cell phone, wanting me to send someone over to let him out of the crypt."

"Why was he there carrying a gun?" MacLeod asked with a frown.

"Maybe he was afraid he would get mugged?" Methos suggested.

"Well, who ever you plan to assign as my Watcher, you better make sure he packs a cross and stake instead of a gun. Especially if he is going to follow me to Sunnydale." Buffy told Joe. "Guns really aren't much good against vampires."

"Buffy, I told you before..." Buffy finished Methos' sentence: "...that I can't keep on slaying without endangering the rest of you guys. Well, you're wrong. I guess it's because I'm still the Slayer - I mean I still have all my Slayer powers - but Angel says that I don't feel the same as a regular Immortal. So, no problem there. And there really needs to be a Slayer in Sunnydale to keep an eye on the Hellmouth and all the nasties it draws in. I'll call my friends later and see if one of them can come out and pick me up."

"And how are your friends going to take the fact you're still alive?" MacLeod asked.

"Actually they already know. I called Xander last night from the dojo. The only person that thinks I'm dead is my father, and he has pretty much been acting as if I were for a while now anyway." Buffy told him bitterly. "So no problem there either."

"What about the hospital and police records?" Joe wanted to know.

"Willow is really good with a computer. She'll take care of them for me." Buffy shrugged. "And don't worry about my sword training. Giles can help me with that."

"Giles is you're ex-Watcher, isn't he? Do you think he might be interested in becoming a different kind of Watcher?" Joe asked.

"I don't know. Why don't you ask him?"

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"Does it strike anyone else as suspicious that it was Buffy and not Angel that asked us to come here?" Xander asked as Oz van pulled up in front of the building Buffy had directed them to.

"At least the place has windows." Willow pointed out. "Of which - not

- all of them - are covered."

"Well, duh! Angel is up there as well, of course they would have to cover some of the windows." Cordelia snorted. "And I hope he realizes that I am only bringing him the new clothes he asked for because I was coming here anyway with you guys. It's not like I'm his maid or something."

"What happened to his old clothes?" Oz wanted to know.

"Knowing Angel they probably got ruined in a fight. You'd think he'd be more careful of his wardrobe..." Cordelia shrugged unconcerned.

"You think he got into a fight with Buffy?" Willow asked wide-eyed.

"If he did, I'm thinking he lost, since it was Buffy that called us here." Oz said as he turned off the van.

"Which has me wondering just how many vicious vampires we will have to deal with." Xander said as he opened the sliding door.

"If there was anything to worry about Angel would have warned me when he called me earlier." Cordelia told him impatiently.

"Not if he is one of those vicious vampires now." Xander pointed out. "Buffy managed to make him lose his soul once before."

"Yes, well, I don't think that a repeat of that is all that likely under the circumstances." Giles objected. "But it is better to be prepared for any eventuality." With that he handed out a cross and bottle of Holy Water to each of them, then opened the bag holding the tranquilizer gun and took out a brace of darts. "Here each of you take one of these as well. Just be careful who you stick with these. And Xander, even if Angel should act... soulless, please try to wait before you take him out until we know that it isn't just an act. He may well be our best ally in there."

"What makes you think that I would be the first to jump on Angel?" Xander asked. "Who was it that kept him from incinerating himself after Buffy died?"

Giles just shook his head and led the way into the building.

As Giles knocked on the apartment door, Xander made sure that he was right there beside him cross held at the ready. He had promised Buffy he'd make sure the others were all right, and he was determined to keep that promise.

The door opened and Xander felt as if he had been struck by lightning. In front of him stood one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. She was tall and slim with long black hair that flowed down past her waist. High cheek bones and the most incredible green eyes that sparkled with a mysterious light.

"Hello." she said in a deep melodious voice that sent a shiver down Xander's back.

"Uh." Xander answered stunned.

With a smile she stretched out one of her hands in greeting. "I'm Cassandra, and you must be one of Buffy's friends?"

"Uh. Hi. Xander." Xander introduced himself awkwardly reaching to take her hand, forgetting that he still held the cross in it. "Is me. Buffy's friend. Yes."

Cassandra took the cross from him with a puzzled expression on her face. "Ah, thanks. I guess you're real religious? Why don't you come in?"

'Smooth, Xander, real smooth.' he told himself as he followed her into the apartment. 'Way to impress the lady.'

There were three other men in the living room kitchen combination that Cassandra led them to. One was a gray haired man with a short beard, that was sitting on the sofa a walking cane held in his right hand, that didn't look at all dangerous. The second was a tall skinny guy in his late twenties standing in the bright light shining in through one of the windows, which made it pretty clear that he couldn't be a vampire.

That only left the third guy standing over by the kitchen island well out of the way of any direct sunlight. Even as Xander registered his dark good looks, broad shoulders and black pony-tail, Cordelia stepped up to him holding out her cross to him with a brilliant smile. "Hi, I'm Cordelia. And you are?"

He accepted the cross throwing a puzzled look at Cassandra then returned her smile and swept her an elaborate bow. "Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod, at your service, my lady."

"Uh, I like that!" Cordelia grinned at him.

MacLeod handed the cross back to her. "Is this some kind of new custom in Sunnydale to hand around crosses?"

"Not really, but it is an excellent way to make sure you're not a vampire. Too many cute guys turn out to be one, you know?" Cordelia told him with a shrug. "Which is a real bummer. I mean there you go to all that trouble to be nice to someone and all they want to do is suck your blood. Such a waste of effort!"

"Yes, now that we have established that none of these people here is a vampire," Giles interrupted, "Where are Buffy and Angel?"

"I'm right here." Angel's voice came from beside Xander making him jump. "I see you brought my clothes, Cordy. Thank you."

"No problem. Just don't think that I'll do that every time. What happened to your shirt?" Cordelia wanted to know.

"Ran into a guy with a sword." Angel shrugged taking the bag of clothes Cordy handed him.

Xander took in the vampires disheveled and singed appearance. "That sure don't look like sword damage to me. I thought I talked you out of watching the sun rise." Xander said pointing at the burn scars covering a good part of Angel's face and part of his torso.

"You were going to watch the sun rise?" Came Buffy's upset voice as she stalked into the room.

"Buffy, I..." Angel began, but Buffy kept right on talking.

"I thought we had been through this last Christmas!" - "I..." - "Wasn't that snowfall enough to convince you that you have as much right to live as anyone else?" - "It was..." - "What more does it take?" Buffy was getting more and more upset, poking Angel in the chest with her finger and not letting him get a word in edge wise. "How did you think I would feel? The world needs you. I need you. You can do so much good Angel..." Finally giving up on trying to make her listen to him, Angel took her by the shoulders and covered her lips with his own, effectively ending her infuriated tirade.

Xander shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other as he watched Buffy throw her arms around his neck and pull him deeper into the kiss. After a moment Angel reluctantly pulled away.

"You taught me that there are things worth fighting for, no matter whether we can win or not, remember?" Angel told her in a quiet voice running one hand through her open hair. "I promise you, I'll never throw my life away like that. Okay?"

"Okay." Buffy whispered her eyes still locked on his face.

"Buffy!" Willow exclaimed surprised. "You're you! I mean you're not mean - like in being a soulless vampire. How come you didn't lose your soul?"

Buffy reluctantly turned away from Angel and smiled at all of them in turn. "Probably because I'm not a vampire. Seems I'm Immortal instead, like these guys here." Buffy gestured at the other people in the room then added. "Except for Joe here. He's a Watcher - a different kind of Watcher. They watch, but they don't really have anything to do with the Immortals - except for watching them that is."

"Immortal? But you were dead. We all saw you dead!" Willow gripped one of Buffy's arms as if to reassure herself that she was really there.

"Yeah, Buff," Xander said laying a hand on one of her shoulders. "What's the deal with that? I thought Immortal means that you can't die?"

"Well, as you saw, I can still die, I just don't stay dead - unless someone cuts off my head. Which is how Angel got hurt." Then she corrected with a frown. "Not trying to cut off my head, trying to keep someone else from doing so..."

"It might be less confusing if you started to tell the story from the beginning, Buffy." Angel advised her with a fond smile.

"Yes, considerably less confusing." Giles agreed still looking slightly stunned. "Immortal you say?"

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Angel silently watched Oz' van disappear into the night, taking Buffy back to her life in Sunnydale and leaving him to continue his work here in LA.

"Can I give you a ride back to the Office?" Cordelia asked beside him.

"No thanks, I think I'll walk. I have things I need to think about." Angel told her with a shake of his head.

"Okay, just don't take too long. Doyle has another headache waiting for you, and from what he told me this might be someone actually able to pay for our help, so you better not pass this one up." Cordelia told him disapprovingly. "You can brood all you want later, when you don't have a *paying* customer to take care of."

"Thanks Cordy. Tell Doyle I'll be there later. Maybe he can get some of the foot work out of the way before I get there." Angel told her over his shoulder as he started down the road.

As he had told Buffy nothing had really changed and yet everything had.

Buffy was Immortal. With any luck she would live as long or longer than he himself. And Cassandra, a witch with 3000 years worth of experience, was going to look into a way to fix the loophole in his curse.

He wouldn't let himself believe that there was actually a way to fix it, but the tiny tendril of hope that Buffy had planted in his heart stubbornly refused to die completely.

It seemed that every time he thought that he finally had his life figured out and accepted his place in the scheme of things, something happened to turn his whole world upside down and he was back to square one.

He had been resigned to spending the rest of his life in Galway, only to have Darla show up and turn him into a vampire.

And no sooner had he built himself a place in the vampire community as the Master's right hand man, feared and respected, then those gypsies had to come along and restore his soul.

Then there was the whole roller coaster ride of his relationship with Buffy. It had taken him over a year to accept the fact that she actually did love him, despite of what he was. But the moment he had allowed himself to believe in that love and his possible redemption, it had all been taken away again.

With a sigh he pushed the whole problem to the side as unsolvable, and tried to ignore the small tendril of hope sinking its roots deeper into his heart.

The End

End
file.